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Language Choice in Expressing Swear Words among Multilinguals in an Iranian Azari-Speaking City

Abstract

The growing prevalence of multilingualism in our interconnected world has sparked the attention of scholars across various fields, particularly in understanding how proficient multilingual individuals articulate their emotions. This qualitative study explores how Azari multilinguals in an Iranian Azari-speaking city express emotions, specifically swearing preferences. Twenty adult multilinguals (10 female, 10 male), fluent in Azari, Persian, and English, participated. Semi-structured interviews examined their language preferences when expressing anger and swearing. Thematic analyses revealed Azari swear words carried the most emotional weight, leading most participants to choose Azari to vent frustration. Gender differences were also noted, with females generally refraining from swearing. However, when they did swear, they predominantly used milder swear words in Persian. This study provides valuable insights into the language dynamics of multilingual communities, with significant implications for researchers and language educators regarding practical applications for language education and social interaction.

Keywords: Multilingualism, Azari, Swear words, Language preference, Qualitative research.

1 Introduction

Multilingualism, a growing phenomenon in our interconnected world, is attracting increasing academic interest. Researchers are exploring its various aspects, from cognitive processes like memory and learning to the complex relationship between language use and identity. A particularly interesting aspect of multilingualism is the emotional expression of individuals who are proficient in multiple languages.

In this study, “emotional expression” is defined as expressing feelings through language. “Negative emotion” includes feelings such as anger, frustration, and sadness. A “swearword” is a word or phrase that is considered vulgar, offensive, or obscene in the languages spoken by the participants.

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in the work of Dewaele (2015: 357–370) and Pavlenko (2006: 18). Dewaele (2015: 357–370) in his comprehensive exploration of “Culture and Emotional Language” highlighted the nuances of language choice in emotionally charged situations. For instance, Dewaele observed that individuals like Jane, a British woman fluent in both her native English and acquired Croatian, preferred Croatian to express anger, perceiving it as more authentic (Dewaele 2015: 357–370). This phenomenon resonates with

Pavlenko's concept of 'double selves,' which is particularly relevant to those who acquired their L2 in adulthood (Pavlenko 2006: 18).

Dewaele's research (2015: 365) revealed that while swear words in one's L1 were generally perceived as more potent, the choice of language for swearing was not exclusively their L1. Participants who had integrated the culture of their L2 adopted local linguistic practices, including swearing, transforming L2 swear words from harmless, humour-filled expressions to powerful expletives (Dewaele 2015: 365). Dewaele (2010: 599) found that multilingual individuals typically preferred their dominant language, often their L1, for swearing, with less use of classroom-learned or later-acquired languages for swearing. Complementing these findings, Jay and Janschewitz (2008: 267–288) discovered that men swear more when angry and especially around other men. They found that swearing patterns are influenced not only by the speaker's and listener's gender but also by sociocultural factors and pragmatic variables such as conversational context and speaker-listener dynamics (Jay & Janschewitz 2008: 267–288).

The current study investigates the language preferences for expressing swear words among 20 Azari multilinguals in Zanjan, Iran, who are proficient in Azari, Persian, and English. It uses semi-structured interviews to examine emotions, swear words, and language switching in various contexts. The research aims to understand the dynamics of language choice when expressing anger and swearing among these multilinguals, exploring the emotional impact of Azari swear words and the influence of gender on swearing behaviors.

This study is grounded in the understanding of how multilingual individuals navigate the complexity of expressing emotions, particularly negative emotions such as anger, frustration, or sadness, often expressed through swearing. A "swearword" is defined as a word or phrase considered vulgar, offensive, or obscene in the languages spoken by the participants. Expanding on prior studies, this research delves into the intricate relationship between multilingualism and emotions, specifically examining the language choices of Azari multilinguals in Iran for expressing swear words and the rationale behind these choices. The study not only explores language preferences but also investigates the underlying reasons and attitudes towards different languages when swearing. By focusing on a specific linguistic community and emotional expression through swearing, it offers new insights into the complex dynamics of language choice in multilingual contexts, thereby enhancing our understanding of the emotional aspects of language use.

2 Previous Research

2.1 The Nature of Swearing: A Multifaceted Linguistic Phenomenon

Dewaele's (2004: 85) study, citing Drescher's (2000) research, discusses the linguistic significance of swearing, or "ST-words". These expressions convey emotions and play key roles in discourse, such as facilitating conversation flow, interaction organization, and structuring exchanges, akin to discourse markers (Dewaele 2004: 85). Expanding on this, Dewaele (2010: 597–598) explores the role of "swearwords". These words, also known as "taboo words" or "cursing", serve multiple functions such as marking identity, setting social norms, and structuring interactions. Their emotional impact varies based on the speaker's cultural and linguistic conventions (Dewaele 2010: 597–598).

Jay and Janschewitz (2007: 219) further classify swearwords as “expressives”, highlighting their role in vividly conveying emotions or feelings in a way that can physiologically arouse the speaker (Jay & Janschewitz 2007: 219). In another study by Jay and Janschewitz (2008: 267–288), they presented a swearing framework, differentiating propositional and non-propositional forms. Propositional swearing is planned and controlled, while non-propositional swearing is spontaneous, often due to sudden emotions or neurological conditions (Jay & Janschewitz 2008: 267–288).

In a similar vein, Carolin Debray’s (2023: 156) study explores swearing in multilingual, intercultural professional interactions. The research finds that swearing can foster social cohesion and positive relationships, and is used for identity building and group solidarity. There’s a correlation between language proficiency and swearing, with less proficient speakers swearing less. The study provides insights into the use of swearing in professional contexts (Debray 2023: 156).

2.2 The Decision to Swear: Language Choice and Multilingual Dynamics

Dewaele (2004a: 101–102) suggests that the choice of swearing language is complex. Swear words in one’s L1 often carry more emotional weight, and some individuals avoid swearing in their L1 due to childhood psychological barriers. The study observes gender dynamics in swearing language choice. Males often use their L1 for swearing among peers to express anger. Multilinguals typically swear in their dominant language but may use a milder language to lessen impact or circumvent social norms against swearing in their L1 (Dewaele 2004a: 101–102).

Indeed, the study by Gawinkowska et al. (2013: 1–6) found that Polish-English bilingual students felt more at ease using offensive language and swearing in their L2. This implies that the use of a foreign language can free individuals from societal or personal constraints, thus enhancing the likelihood of using offensive language or swear words (Gawinkowska et al. 2013: 1–6).

Echoing these insights, Shakiba and Stapleton’s (2022: 21–22) study on Persian immigrants’ swearing language choices found that English swearwords are used more by women with higher Social Initiative, while Persian swearwords are used more by men with lower Emotional Stability. There’s a positive correlation between swearing frequency, self-rated language knowledge, Cultural Empathy, and Open-mindedness. The study underscores the role of personality and socio-biographical factors in these choices. The research contributes to understanding swearing as a complex behavior influenced by intra-individual and inter-individual factors. It reveals a paradoxical preference for the L2, challenging the expectation that individuals would prefer swearing in their emotionally stronger L1. The findings support the multi-competence perspective, suggesting that learning another language extends beyond linguistic knowledge to also affect personality traits (Shakiba and Stapleton 2022: 21–22).

Building on this, Huiberts’ (2021: 42–46) Master’s Thesis examines the impact of Dutch and English swear words in beer ads aimed at young Dutch audiences. The study found Dutch swear words to be more shocking than English ones, but this didn’t significantly influence the ads’ effectiveness. It suggests that English swear words could be more effective in advertising under certain conditions (Huiberts 2021: 42–46).

2.3 Swearing's Varied Functions: Beyond Emotional Expression

Swearing serves as a conduit for various pragmatic functions that extend beyond emotional expressions. These functions encompass emphasizing feelings, establishing and reinforcing group identity, conveying positive emotions, and emphasizing emotional states (Jay 2000; Crawford 1997; Jay & Janschewitz 2008). Based on the work of Wang (2013: 75), swearing can also serve aggressive purposes, often directed toward specific targets, constituting a face-threatening act, as described by Holtgraves (Holtgraves 2001).

Building on this, field studies indicate that public swearing is common and typically conversational, not emotional or aggressive. Swearing primarily conveys anger, but listener interpretation can differ. Its role is influenced by factors like context, gender, age, and familiarity. Notably, males use L2/L3 languages to lessen the impact of swear words when addressing females (Jay 1992, 2000; Jay & Janschewitz 2006; Jay 2008: 267–271).

Beers Fägersten's (2012: 57) study on conversational swearing offers insights into diverse swearing tones. The variability of offensiveness in swearing is supported by the data for the tone of utterance. As per Hymes (1974), the tone in which swear words are spoken is crucial, as it can overshadow the explicit offensiveness of the words themselves (Fägersten 2012: 57). Fägersten's findings challenge the belief that swearing is exclusively linked to anger, indicating that it can be expressed in various emotional tones beyond abrasiveness or aggression (Fägersten 2012: 32–33). The study categorizes tones of swearing into social and annoyance swearing. The former, including humorous, emphatic, excited, anecdotal, supportive, sarcastic, serious, and surprised tones, constitutes a significant portion of spontaneous swearing utterances (Fägersten 2012: 102). This aligns with the notion that swearing serves diverse social functions beyond emotional expression. For instance, humorous swearing, found to occur among participants of varying social distance and status, emphasizes the potential role of swearing in bridging gaps and fostering solidarity (Fägersten 2012: 104). Similarly, supportive swearing involves echo responses, indicating a supportive stance toward the initial speaker's choice of swearing as verbal expression (Fägersten 2012: 107).

Beers Fägersten and Stapleton's (2023) study on the series "Only Murders in the Building" highlights the show's unique, frequent use of swearing. This swearing contributes to the show's distinctiveness, portrays the New York setting and its residents, and acts as a gesture of affiliation, appealing to a diverse audience (Fägersten and Stapleton 2023: 103–104). Building on this, Setyaningtias, Heriyanto, and Muhid's (2023) study on UNAKI students' use of swearing words in dormitories provides a different perspective. They identified five types of swearing words used for expressing emotions and fostering intimacy among students. Despite the different contexts, both studies underscore the multifaceted role of swearing in communication and expression (Setyaningtias et al. 2023).

2.4 Independent Variables and Their Influence on Swearing Patterns

Sociolinguists extensively study the impact of variables like gender, age, and social class on the use of Swear-Taboo (S-T) words. Dewaele's (2017: 73–79) research delves into perceptions and usage patterns of the term "cunt" among native English speakers and foreign language users. L1 users find it highly offensive, while LX users are less certain about its meaning, underestimate its offensiveness, and use it less frequently. The study explores psychological

factors and sociobiographical variables, as well as the influence of English language learning history on LX users' understanding and usage of the term (Dewaele 2017: 73–79).

Building on this, Dewaele (2016: 93–98) investigated the expression of anger among Arab-English Londoners and found that native English speakers swear more often, especially in informal settings, due to their better English proficiency and sociolinguistic knowledge. The study highlights the complex interplay between context, psychological traits, and socio-biographical variables in shaping swearing behavior (Dewaele 2016: 93–98).

In a separate study, Dewaele (2004: 83–103) found that males and younger individuals tend to use more taboo words, irrespective of their social class. The choice between taboo and colloquial words is influenced by personality traits, with introverts avoiding taboo words and extroverts using them more. The study also found a correlation between language proficiency, frequency of use, and the proportion of colloquial vocabulary used (Dewaele 2004a: 83–103).

Dewaele (2004b: 219–220), citing Register's (1996) research, found that male ESL learners in the USA are more proficient in using taboo terms. However, female non-native speakers showed concern over the use of swearwords within gendered language norms. The choice of language for swearing is influenced by factors such as the timing and method of language acquisition, and its daily usage (Dewaele 2004b: 219–220).

Chapter two of Beers Fägersten's (2012: 31–37) book discusses gender differences in swearing. It references historical perspectives of Jespersen (1922) and Lakoff (1975), influencing the belief that men swear more than women (Limbrick 1991). The chapter introduces 'social swearing' and 'annoyance swearing' concepts, based on Ross (1969), and observes that female swearing often incites laughter and is less echoed than male swearing, suggesting potential gender differences in societal swearing norms (Fägersten 2012: 31–37).

Fägersten's (2012: 140–142) study explores variations in swearing patterns among males and females, finding that males use fewer swear words when communicating with females, a behavior termed "self-divergent prescriptivism." This behavior supports traditional gender norms on swearing and highlights the discrepancy between actual and perceived swearing behavior (Fägersten 2012: 140–142). Similarly, Schweinberger's (2017: 15–18) study found that younger speakers and men in Irish English swear more, particularly in Northern Ireland and same-gender conversations. There is no correlation between education level and swearing behavior in Irish English, unlike in British English (Schweinberger 2017: 15–18). Furthering this, Schweinberger (2018) found that swearing is more common in same-gender conversations, emphasizing the role of social context in swearing (Schweinberger 2018).

In the Persian cultural context, Nezakat-Alhossaini and Esslami-Rasekh's (2013: 521–523) study found that females, regardless of their education level, and less educated individuals curse more frequently. Females use cursing as an emotional outlet due to perceived lower social power. The study highlights the influence of gender, education, and culture on cursing behavior, with educated individuals preferring non-confrontational strategies (Nezakat-Alhossaini & Esslami-Rasekh 2013: 521–523).

Shakiba and Stapleton's (2022: 10–11) research provides an in-depth analysis of the swearing preferences among Persian immigrants, taking into account socio-biographical factors, personality traits, and the historical and social contexts of Iran. The study underscores the significant role of societal norms in Iran, particularly in shaping language use among women, and links less frequent swearing with higher education and elevated social status (Shakiba & Stapleton 2022: 10–11). Shakiba's prior research (2007) complements these

findings, indicating a higher frequency of swearing among men and younger individuals, while highly educated women tend to employ more polite language (Shakiba 2007).

2.5 Proficiency and Cultural Norms: Their Role in Multilingual Swearing Choices

Dewaele's (2004) studies reveal that multilinguals often swear in their L1, even if it's not understood by others. Some avoid L1 swearing due to its intensity or language limitations. Speaking in a non-native language can bypass cultural norms, making certain English swear words more acceptable due to their foreignness and lower emotional impact (Dewaele 2004b: 204–220). Further research found a link between language proficiency and swearing frequency. Those who acquired a language naturally or through mixed methods understood the culture-dependent nature of swearing. Strong taboo words in one's L1 couldn't be directly transposed into a second language (Dewaele 2004b: 212–220).

Adding to this, Padjen's (2022: 37–45) thesis explores the emotional aspects of swearing among Croatian speakers. Despite frequent English use, participants mainly swear in Croatian, perceived as more emotionally intense. The study suggests an emotional detachment from English and highlights the impact of learning methods on emotional expression. Most participants favor Croatian for swearing and emotional expression, emphasizing the cultural and emotional significance of native languages (Padjen 2022: 37–45).

To sum up, this literature review delves into swearing in multilingual contexts, studying its nature, functions, and the factors influencing its use such as gender, age, and social class. It investigates the language preferences of Azari multilinguals for swearing, with a focus on emotional impact and gender nuances. The study aims to enhance understanding of multilingualism and emotional expression, offering valuable insights for language education and social interaction in multilingual communities.

3 Research Design

3.1 Rationale for the Present Study

Building upon foundational studies, this research explores the connection between multilingualism and emotions, specifically language choice for expressing swearwords among Azari multilinguals in Iran. It examines the reasons behind these choices and the attitudes of multilingual individuals toward different languages in the context of swearing. Focusing on a specific linguistic community, the study provides insights into language choice dynamics, highlighting the complexity of multilingual communication and contributing to our understanding of the emotional dimensions of language use.

3.2 Research Questions

1. Which languages do Azari multilinguals prefer to use for swearing?
2. What motivates Azari multilingual speakers to choose specific languages for swearing?

3.3 Participants

The study included 20 participants (10 female, 10 male), aged 23 to 35. They were all proficient in Azari (L1), Persian (L2, learned from childhood as Iran’s official language), and English (FL). They were selected based on their language proficiency and all participants were from Zanjan, a province in Iran known for its Azerbaijani population and were either English teachers or graduate students in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL).

Northwest Iran, including Zanjan, has a significant Azerbaijani population, with most inhabitants being bilingual in Azari and Persian. Azari, a Turkic language, is the primary language of the Azerbaijani people in both the Republic of Azerbaijan and Iran’s Azerbaijan region, and is still referred to as Turki or Torki in Iran despite a name change to “Azerbaijani” in the 1930s. Persian, Iran’s official language, is learned during childhood and used alongside Azari. English is commonly learned as FL, often through formal education. Azari is used in informal settings, Persian is used in both formal contexts such as education and official communications, as well as in informal and everyday situations, and English is linked with education, professionalism, and global communication.

3.4 Instruments

The study utilized a carefully designed research tool to explore participants’ language preferences and the use of swearwords. The interview questions were crafted based on the study’s goals and an extensive review of related studies. A “swearword” was defined as any word or phrase considered vulgar, offensive, or obscene in the languages spoken by the participants. This definition was explained at the start of each interview. The methodology comprised the collection of qualitative data through semi-structured interviews, delving into various aspects of language and emotional expression. The interviews were designed to capture the subtleties of language choice, with a specific focus on swearwords. Each interview was segmented into three sections – ‘Language and Emotions’, ‘Swearing’, and ‘Language Switching’. Each section was accompanied by relevant follow-up questions (see the appendix).

Before the main data collection, a pilot study was conducted with 2 participants to refine and modify the interview questions for clarity and relevance. Interviews were primarily conducted in a quiet room for in-person sessions, while some were held via video call, also in a quiet environment, based on participant preference. An informal setting was chosen to encourage natural language use, in line with the study’s focus. Participants had the option to choose the interview format and setting according to their comfort and ease.

The semi-structured interview format allowed for both planned questions and spontaneous, natural dialogue. While I aimed to cover all pre-planned questions, additional questions were sometimes asked in response to participant answers, facilitating a conversational flow that remained within the study’s objectives. This approach fostered an open, conversational environment that supported authentic language use.

All interviews were conducted meticulously, with participants’ consent obtained for both the interviews and the subsequent transcription of recorded data.

3.5 Data Analysis

The study used recorded interviews, transcribed verbatim, using an orthographic transcription convention as the primary data source. Each interview, including spontaneous conversational segments, was fully transcribed to accurately capture the linguistic nuances of the participants' responses. While nonverbal expressions and pauses were not marked, all verbal responses were transcribed precisely to maintain the integrity of the language used. A thematic analysis approach was then employed to extract meaningful insights from the data. The participants' responses were captured accurately using conventional spelling. Following the transcription, a systematic coding process was used to identify recurring patterns, themes, and concepts, which were then organized into broader themes. The study began with three main goals, each represented by a color code:

Yellow: Instances where participants expressed emotions in any language, Blue: The language participants used when swearing, Pink: The reasons behind participants' choice of language for swearing

As the study progressed, additional codes were identified and assigned both color and numerical identifiers:

00: Most used language, 01: Mother tongue, 02: Language for emotions, 03: Language for swearing, 04: Reasons for swearing language choice, 05: Swearing usage in different contexts, 06: Language switching instances, 07: Reasons for language switching, 08: Using Azari for swearing, 09: Using Persian for swearing, 10: Using English for swearing, Underlined text: examples, Different colors: the reasons behind the behaviors.

After coding, a theme table was created to highlight significant findings beyond the primary research goals:

1. Preference for using Azari for swearing, 2. Women's avoidance of swear words with strong emotional force, 3. Perception of stronger emotional force in Azari swear words

After identifying themes, relevant interview extracts were added for context and support. This approach provided a nuanced understanding of the participants' language use in emotional contexts. The iterative process of coding and theme development led to a comprehensive overview of key themes, revealing underlying patterns and offering valuable insights into the research questions.

4 Results

4.1 Language Preferences for Swearing and Emotional Impact

The study found that (13 out of 20) participants preferred using Azari for swearing and expressing anger, attributing this preference to the emotional force of Azari swear words. However, it's important to note that Azari was not the universally preferred language for swearing among all participants. Sam, for instance, articulated his preference for Azari swearing due to his familiarity with its swearwords and the intensity of emotions they carry:

- 1) "Sam: I prefer the language for swearing which I know better like Azari, Persian, and a little French and English. At the moment I choose Azari. Because I know its swear words better. And the other reason is the Azari language is harsh, and its curses are juicier."

The proficiency in a language's swearwords influences the choice of language for swearing. Individuals tend to use the language they are most skilled in when expressing strong emotions. Anastasia, for example, favored Azari for swearing, citing its strong emotional impact:

- 2) "Anastasia: I use Azari for swearing. Because Azari, as you know, has the most and strong effect in swearing, I don't know, when you say '*khare*' (donkey) to someone, it has a very weak impression on people. But when you say '*eshak*' (donkey) it has a very strong effect."

Notably, the choice of swearing language varied based on individuals' swearing goals. Nicola preferred Azari because she believed it alleviated more negative feelings and confounded her opponents with unfamiliar Azari swearwords:

- 3) "Nicola: My swearing is almost in Azari because I think it reduces more negative feelings from my soul, and it's more horrid, and many people don't know the meaning of them, and they can't find answers for them."

Furthermore, Azari was found to have a significant effect in releasing emotions, particularly in reducing stress, anger, or hatred, making it a preferred choice for many participants. Some participants chose a language that could quickly and accurately express their intentions, especially in time-limited confrontations. Leo attested to the strong emotional force of Azari swearwords:

- 4) "Leo: I use Azari swear words. Some Azari expressions can cause a fight, but at first, I knew them as an exaggeration. For example: "*ela budu ke budu*." (that's just the way it is.) in Azari, you can convey a whole meaning."

Celine used Azari swearing for its immediate and liberating effect as well:

- 5) "Celine: I choose Azari for swearing, because it has a strong effect, and I will feel free. When I was angry at that time, the Azari words come into my mind, and I use them."

Rambo, who aimed to maintain composure when angered, found Azari swearing instrumental in achieving this:

- 6) "Rambo: I don't like to insult people. As far as I can, I avoid cursing, but Azari swearing is certainly a great case. It will clarify the point. When you are angry, the main thing which keeps you calm is Azari curse. It will describe the guy in detail."

Price echoed similar sentiments about the richness and effectiveness of Azari swearwords:

- 7) "Price: WAzari is a rich language in concept. For example: you say a word in Azari, and if you want to give a Persian synonym of it, you may say a sentence or even more than one sentence. In the case of swearing or saying something cool, it really depends on the meaning and the concept, and the shorter your sentence gets, the better it is, and it can contain more concepts in it at the moment. The other feature of Azari is that its words are effective and sometimes funny sounds which make it appropriate for making someone laugh. For example: when you are calling a fat person "*hendoune*" (watermelon), it sounds cool, but when you say "*gharpiz*" (watermelon), it sounds effective and has much more fun in it."

Interestingly, Some participants differentiated their swearing language based on the gender of the person they were addressing. For instance, Rambo used Azari when extremely angry, regardless of the listener's language, but switched to Persian when speaking to women:

- 8) "Rambo: In general, I like to curse in a language which my contact does not understand because I don't like to make anybody sad. Because you are angry in a while, and you say a word, and then it is finished, and you will be surely regretful of your speech. But

yeah, I will usually curse women in Persian, men in Azari, and if he/she is not familiar or there is no contact, I usually use Azari. I will curse in Azari with myself.”

This language distinction stemmed from the perceived emotional force of Azari swearwords and the desire to avoid causing undue distress, particularly to women. Participants, like Rambo, believed that women were more vulnerable, leading them to avoid using language with greater emotional impact.

4.2 Limited Use of Strong Swearwords Among Some Participants

The research also revealed that some participants, specifically 6 women, refrained from using swearwords with strong emotional force. Katy, for instance, rarely swore, and when she did, her swearwords were mainly in Persian, due to its perceived closeness and its ability to avoid harshness:

- 9) “Katy: I use Persian for swearing. Maybe there is one phrase like “shut up” in English that I want to use it. I use Persian because of more intimacy, or I feel English swear words are harsher. I don’t want to be that much harsh. I think Azari swear words are harsher, and because of that, I try to not use them at all.”

However, it should be noted that most participants who chose Azari as their swearing language did not necessarily use strong swearwords. For instance, Julia used Persian for swearing in serious situations, but chose Azari when the situation was less intense:

- 10) “Julia: I use Persian more, but sometimes Azari too. When the problem is serious and I’m in my workplace, it happens in Persian. Maybe it’s for seriousness. But when I’m driving alone maybe I swear in Azari. I don’t swear anybody in face-to-face condition. And the situations that I’ve mentioned for swearing maybe happen when I’m alone, and nobody can hear it. When it’s not a serious problem, I use Azari swear words.”

Hila, another participant, rarely swore but, when she did, it was usually in Persian. She attributed this choice to not knowing swearwords in English or Azari, and when anger did arise, she reverted to Persian:

- 11) “Hila: Maybe I get angry I shout but don’t use swearing. For example, when I am in traffic and drivers close the way or drive badly, I use routine words like most people that use in these situations, like “*bishour*” (stupid), “*avazi boro ounvar*” (asshole get away), but I never use indecent words. I use Persian for swearing. I don’t know swearing in English and Azari, and I’ve not used them.”

The study found that some participants avoided swearing or used milder swearwords. Some multilinguals, particularly women, swore in their L2 to reduce emotional intensity, despite acknowledging the emotional power of Azari swearwords.

5 Discussion

5.1 Potency of Azari Swearwords

The study revealed a consensus among participants, with 13 individuals expressing that Azari swearwords carry a significantly stronger emotional impact compared to Persian and English equivalents. This emotional intensity influences language preference, leading participants to favor their L1, Azari, for swearing. These results are consistent with Dewaele’s (2004: 102) research, which highlights the prevalence of first L1 use for swearing. However, it’s important

to note that Azaris in Iran use both Persian and Azari interchangeably in their daily lives from childhood. Some learn Persian early on from family members, while others acquire it upon entering kindergarten or school. As a result, Persian and Azari are deeply interconnected in their lives, with some individuals even using Persian more frequently and proficiently due to its status as the country's and academia's language. Additionally, according to Dewaele (2004) participants who learned a language in naturalistic or mixed contexts were more likely to use it for swearing, especially in emotionally intense situations (Dewaele 2004a: 102). In line with this, the study's participants affirmed the strong emotional impact of Azari swearwords. Regardless of their current linguistic environment, participants consistently chose Azari swearwords, demonstrating the lasting emotional connection to their L1. Dewaele's (2015: 364–365) research indicates that L1 swearwords carry more emotional force. However, proficient speakers of a second language may also use L2 for swearing, reflecting language proficiency progression (Dewaele 2015: 364–365).

5.2 Azari as the Preferred Swearing Language

Participants predominantly preferred Azari for expressing anger through swearing due to its emotional impact. One participant found it calming to use Azari swearwords when angry, regardless of the recipient's understanding. The individual adjusted their swearing language based on the listener's gender, showing the emotional depth of Azari swear words and a nod to social etiquette.

The study's findings align with Jay and Janschewitz's (2008: 274) research, highlighting gender's role in swearing behavior. Men are more likely to use swear words, particularly in public and same-gender situations (Jay & Janschewitz 2008: 274). Dewaele (2010: 598) noted that the acceptability of swearing is context-dependent, influenced by factors like the speaker-listener relationship, conversation setting, and swear word choice (Dewaele 2010: 598).

Furthermore, In the current study, a participant preferred swearing in their most proficient language, Azari, due to its strong emotional impact. This aligns with Dewaele's (2004b: 213–214) findings that swear words in one's L1 are perceived as having more emotional force and precise connotations (Dewaele 2004b: 213–214). In sum, the study found that swearwords in one's L1 had the most emotional impact, especially for those raised with it. Language choice for swearing varied by the recipient's gender: Azari was used with men for its emotional intensity, while Persian was used with women to maintain decorum.

5.3 Gender Differences in Swearing

The study shows that swearing habits differ by gender. Some women prefer less intense swear words, often in Persian, while most men favor Azari. Despite acknowledging the emotional intensity of Azari, some women use their L2 to reduce the emotional impact of swearing. These findings align with Dewaele's (2004b: 206–209) research, indicating gender-based differences in the use of swear words. Sociolinguists have observed that young males tend to use more taboo and swear words, while women gravitate towards softer expressions (Dewaele 2004b: 206–209). This gender disparity is supported by Register's (1996: 44–49) study, which found that male learners used swear words more frequently than their female counterparts (Register 1996: 44–49).

Jay and Janschewitz's studies (2006, 2008) show that cultural norms influence gender-specific expressions of anger. Men swear more when frustrated or angry, while women are mindful of the impact on relationships. Swearing also depends on the gender of both speaker and listener, with men using harsher language around other men. This supports the idea that women generally use milder swear words in most societies (Jay & Janschewitz 2006, 2008).

Adding to this, Shakiba and Stapleton's (2022: 10–11) study found that Persian immigrants' swearing habits were influenced by Iran's feudalistic history and gender roles. Men used taboo words more frequently, with one word used exclusively by men. Age and education also played a role, with older and more educated women swearing less and using more polite language. Cultural norms influenced language use, with Iranian women taught to consider cultural appropriateness and educated individuals avoiding swear words due to social status implications. The study also noted a preference for indirectness and euphemisms among Persians (Shakiba & Stapleton 2022: 10–11).

In sum, the study finds that gender shapes swearing behavior. Women often opt for milder Persian swear words, while men favor stronger Azari expressions, echoing Dewaele's (2004b) findings on gender differences. Cultural norms dictate gender-specific anger expression, with men more prone to public swearing and harsh language usage (Jay & Janschewitz 2008: 271–274). Additionally, factors like relationship dynamics, setting, and choice of words influence swearing acceptability (Dewaele 2010: 598).

6 Conclusion and Implications

This research delves deeply into the language preferences of Azari multilinguals when expressing emotions through swearing. It uncovers a surprising trend: some female participants prefer using Persian for swearing, shedding light on L2 swearing practices alongside the more common L1 swearing behaviors. Key findings highlight the strong emotional impact of Azari swear words and gender-based differences, particularly women's tendency to choose milder expressions.

This study underscores the vital role of emotional expression in multilingual language dynamics, offering essential insights for educators to promote communication and cultural diversity in educational settings. It also underscores the complexity of swearing among Azari multilinguals, advocating for its consideration in educational approaches.

In essence, this research enhances our comprehension of the interplay between language and emotion, with a specific focus on swearing practices among Azari multilinguals, and underscores the importance of empathy in communication. It also underscores the need for further research in this intriguing field, underlining the significance of investigating the interrelation of language and emotion in a variety of contexts.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. How many languages do you speak?
What are they, and how did you learn each of them?
2. Which language do you use the most?
In which situations do you use it? How often do you use it? When and where do you use each of the languages? Can you explain your reasons?
3. Does your language choice differ when you speak with different people? With whom?
4. Which language do you often use to express different emotions?
Do you use different languages for expressing your emotions in various situations? Please explain your experiences in different situations.
5. Do you generally swear? When do you swear?
In what situations, if any, do you find yourself using swear words?
6. Which language do you use for swearing? What is your reason?
Do you use different languages for swearing in different situations? What factors influence your choice of language when using swear words?
7. Do you notice any differences in your language use when interacting with different people? Can you provide some examples?
8. Have you ever switched between languages while speaking?
How often do you switch? In what situations do you switch? What are your reasons?