

# Replacing “Them” With “Us”: Language Ideologies and Practices of “Purification” on Facebook

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## ABSTRACT

Adopting an online ethnographic approach, we examine the linguistic/ semiotic practices and ideologies of “purism” among Tatar and Iranian Azerbaijani Facebook users. We argue that purification practices can be understood as identity work, the outcome of which is often not an etymologically “purer” language but a (perceived) “purer” and more “authentic” identity. We show that top-down standardization in Tatar has resulted in more homogenized ideologies regarding “pure” language and “authentic” identity, compared to the more heterogeneous ideologies among Iranian Azerbaijanis. Furthermore, we argue that since these communities rarely use the written form of their languages in off-line contexts, their purification practices are profoundly limited to metapragmatic discourses; however, social media provides a unique venue to also exercise these ideologies linguistically/semiotically. Finally, unlike previous scholarship that has focused on the informality of language use on social media, we illustrate how social media turns out to be a platform to practice formal language.

## KEYWORDS

Azerbaijani/Azeri; language and identity; language ideologies; linguistic purism/ purification; social media; Tatar

Linguistic behavior on the Internet is monitored and regulated by various actors bringing along different language ideologies. As Leppänen and Peuronen (2012) argue, Internet sites develop certain types of regulatory mechanisms that implicitly shape the choice and use of languages. Acts of regulating language choice and use are what Blommaert et al. (2009) refer to as “language policing,” i.e. “the production of ‘order’—normatively organised and policed conduct—which is infinitely detailed and regulated by a variety of actors from the state to individuals, over civil society and corporate actors” (p. 203). Since language policing practices on social media are carried out by various actors, social media becomes a “complex social space” where extremely heterogeneous and homogeneous language ideologies coexist (Phyak, 2015, pp. 379–380). Critical scrutiny of these acts can shed light on how heterogeneous language practices influence, for instance, discursive construction of national and ethnic identities (Heyd, 2014; Lane, 2009), ideologies about minority languages (Wagner, 2011, Sallabank, 2015), or in particular, how social media contributes to shaping ideas on language purity and contamination (Cru, 2015; Yazan, 2015).

This article contributes to the discussion of how social media affects language practices and how these practices can reveal broader social, cultural, and political conditions. We investigate the linguistic practices and ideologies of “purism” among Iranian Azerbaijani and Tatar users of Facebook and argue that the certain similarities and differences between these two bilingual communities can explain the uniformity and/or diversity of the linguistic practices of their members on social media. Despite their similarities regarding, for instance, being ethnolinguistically subordinated, these two communities differ from one another in terms of official status, a

standardized writing system, and education in and of the language. We argue that these differences have led to varying linguistic practices and differing ideologies of purism. In particular, we illustrate that while the processes of standardization in Tatar along with its official status have resulted in more homogenized ideologies among Tatars, the lack of standard form and official status has led to more heterogeneous ideologies among Iranian Azerbaijanis regarding what constitutes ethnolinguistic identity and what counts as legitimate language use.

We also illustrate that social media provides a unique venue for the practices of linguistic purism in these two communities. Specifically, we argue that while ideas of “pure” Azerbaijani and Tatar are mostly restricted to metapragmatic discourses—i.e., explicit comments on language use—outside of the Internet/social media, social media platforms, like Facebook, give the members of these communities the opportunity to practice purist ideologies not only metapragmatically but also linguistically and semiotically. This is because, outside of social media, the speakers of these languages rarely have the chance to use their languages in the written form, since the majority languages, i.e., Persian and Russian, are used in most formal institutional and educational settings. Social media, then, allows these minoritized language users to exercise the written form of their native languages, and since for some of them written language entails formality, they attempt to write in what they perceive to be formal language. While previous scholarship has mostly focused on the *informality* of language use on social media, we illustrate how social media turns out to be a platform for these users to practice *formal* language, given the social and political circumstances around them in Iran and Russia.

We will provide an overview of (1) linguistic purism and our theoretical and analytical approach to it; and (2) the sociopolitical issues surrounding the communities under study. After the methods section, we will analyze these communities’ linguistic/semiotic practices as well as metapragmatic discourses of purism found on Facebook, concluding with the main contributions of the study.

## LINGUISTIC PURIFICATION AS IDENTITY WORK

Previous scholarship has provided different definitions and overviews of the notion of “linguistic purity” and has outlined the key metalinguistic motivations and principal concerns with respect to acts of purification (Allan & Burridge, 2006, pp. 112–124; Langer & Nesse, 2012; Walsh, 2016, pp. 7–34). In this article, we take Brunstad’s (2003) broader definition of linguistic purism as a language planning ideology that involves resistance to foreign elements—an act by a part of a speech community to “preserve a language form” or to get rid of “putative foreign elements or other elements held to be undesirable” (p. 52). The prescriptive nature of acts of purification (Lodge, 1993; Thomas, 1991) makes these acts relevant to processes of standardization, in which certain linguistic forms (e.g., lexical items, orthography, and phonology) as well as certain ways of speaking and writing are prescribed as standard, in pursuit of national and cultural cohesion. As Brunstad (2003) argues, linguistic purification ideology is “always present in the standard language” (p. 53), which means that a researcher’s task is not to attest to the presence of this ideology in a given language but rather to compare differences in intensity, impact, orientation, and typology of purism across languages.

It is reasonable to see the purification movement as part of general ideologies promoting social opposites, such as “us” versus “them” and “correct” versus “incorrect” (Brunstad, 2003, p. 57). The “pure” language becomes one of identity markers, part of a feature cluster that includes descent, history, culture, and religion that secure belonging to a certain ethnic community. Thus, language is an integral part of collective identities, and social networks contribute to the construction and/or negotiation of such identities. Similarly, we regard the purification practices and ideologies to be fundamentally related to identity; therefore, we find Bucholtz and Hall’s (2004a, 2004b, 2005) framework for the linguistic analysis of identities a useful tool for understanding these practices.

Bucholtz and Hall (2004a, 2004b, 2005) consider identity as an *outcome* of culture rather than a source of it; therefore, language, as a type of cultural production, plays a crucial role in identity construction. The identity is shaped within relevant sociopolitical relations, which, they argue, are not static but instead dynamically constructed through semiotic processes. The authors propose three pairs of tactics that establish these relations: *adequation* and *distinction*, *authentication* and *denaturalization*, and *authorization* and *illegitimation*. According to Bucholtz and Hall (2004a, p.384), *adequation* pertains to situational establishment of sameness or likeness and deemphasis of potential differences; whereas *distinction*, conversely, deals with acts of differentiation by making the differences situationally more salient and similarities less salient. *Authentication* emphasizes the role of agency in the production and negotiation of the ideas of what counts as a “real” identity. In contrast, *denaturalization* is a process through which some identities are claimed to be “artificial” and “unreal.” Finally, *authorization* and *illegitimation* “involve the attempt to legitimate an identity through an institutional or other authority, or conversely the effort to withhold or withdraw such structural power” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004a, p. 386).

In this article, we illustrate how linguistic purification is, in essence, an act of *authenticating* ethnonationalist and ethnolinguistic identities. This authentication process primarily involves *denaturalization* of the identity associated with the language that is contaminated by foreign elements. The “foreignness” of these elements, however, is a *sociopolitical* construct rather than a result of *linguistic* differences. That is, the linguistic practices of purification often involve replacing the linguistic features associated with the language(s) of “them” with the features associated with the language(s) of “us.” Such associations indeed are ideologically rendered as inherent links between certain linguistic features and certain national or ethnic identities, in a process Irvine and Gal (2000, p. 37) refer to as “iconization.” The outcome of these processes is often not an etymologically “purer” language, but instead, is the perception of a “purer” and more “authentic” identity. The authenticity of the identities constructed through these linguistic practices as well as the authority claimed by using such “pure” language, as we shall see, may not always be approved of by other group members but may in fact be challenged through *denaturalization* and *illegitimation* processes.

## BACKGROUND

### *Tatars*

Volga Tatars, numbering some six million across the Russian Federation, are one of the country’s largest ethnic minorities, mainly concentrated in the Republic of Tatarstan. The constitution of 1992 allowed for both Russian and Tatar to be state languages in all spheres of language use within the republic. Despite this regulation, there is still a profound asymmetry in the representation of these languages in functional domains: The use of the titular Tatar language is often considered as “marked,” limited, and “particularized,” especially in the public domain, whereas Russian is the “normal,” “unmarked” language that can be used in all spheres (Wertheim, 2003, p. 348).

Immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tatarstani authorities undertook some language planning programs to ensure that Tatar was on equal footing with Russian. We can observe acts of authorization, i.e., legitimation of “certain social identities as culturally intelligible” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004b, p. 503) in the enactment of the laws on education in the 1990s. The new legislation declared Tatar language learning a compulsory subject for all nationalities in secondary schools of the republic. Despite the initial success, the language revival policy toward the titular language in Tatarstan was unable to change the language practices and overcome the ongoing language shift toward Russian (Gorenburg, 2005; Nizamova, 2016; Zamyatin, 2012). Moreover, it resulted in a “latent discontent” with the current language policies among the Russian population of the republic (Khodzhaeva, 2016, p. 303).

The existing asymmetrical bilingualism in Tatarstan is such that in 2010 about 89% of Tatars spoke both state languages of the republic (often the proficiency in Russian is significantly higher than in the native language), whereas only about 10% of Russians speak Tatar. The titular language remains a dominant language of communication in Tatar-populated rural districts; however, a growing number of urban Tatars prefer to use Russian in communication at work and within family circles (Khodzhaeva, 2016). Russian is considered to be a more functional language, whereas Tatar is seen as having a mere symbolic function in transmitting ethnicity. The situation is aggrandized by the decreasing number of schools that provide teaching of native languages as a medium of instruction and a subject. Tatar nationalist groups argue that throughout the campaign for “optimization” launched by the Russian government in 2001, more than 690 Tatar schools were closed (Ivakina, 2017; Zamyatin, 2012, p. 94).

From 2014 to 2016, the government of Tatarstan ran a program to “preserve Tatar national identity,” which aimed also to increase the prestige of Tatar language through establishing various educational and research programs, supporting financially Tatar media channels and festivals, among other methods (Ministerstvo, 2017). These macrolevel language prestige planning goals were complimented by various grassroots initiatives on the micro level. For instance, the Kazan branch of the World Forum of Tatar Youth (TatForum) has been organizing activities that contribute to the equal representation of Tatar and Russian in public spaces in Tatarstan. They request availability of any public information (including signboards and announcements on public transportation) in both state languages, organize the annual festival “Min Tatarcha söyläshäm” [I speak Tatar] and launch projects in translation of popular world literature, e.g., the books about Harry Potter by J. K. Rowling, into Tatar (Inde, 2016). Thus, these microlevel initiatives complement macro language planning methods to enhance the prestige and promote acquisition of Tatar (Baldauf, 2006, p. 165).

### *Azerbaijanis in Iran*

Except for the very old, uneducated generations, the majority of the people in Azerbaijani-speaking regions in Iran are bilingual speakers of Azerbaijani and Persian (Karimzad, 2016). Persian is the only official language in Iran and is used in education, mass media, and administration. Although the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran does not forbid the use of minority languages, the emphasis on Persian as the only official language has had significant consequences for the minoritized languages, including Azerbaijani. In particular, the lack of official status restricts the use of Azerbaijani only to informal domains (Bani-Shoraka, 2005). As a result, it has not been standardized and does not have a standard writing system. In fact, Iranian Azerbaijanis rarely have the opportunity to use formal forms of their language, especially its written form (Karimzad, 2018). Moreover, Iranian Azerbaijanis do not receive education *in* their mother tongue since the medium of instruction is Persian, nor do they have the chance to receive education *of* their language.

In addition, Iranian Azerbaijanis have historically been subjected to ethnolinguistic subordination. On the one hand, Azeri-accented Persian has been an object of mockery among non-Azerbaijanis, especially the Persian-speaking majority. On the other hand, Azerbaijanis are depicted as “less intelligent” and “foolish” in some of the Iranian cultural productions such as jokes—a social stereotype that has been reproduced in non-Azerbaijanis’ everyday interactions (Karimzad, 2018).

Lack of education in and of the language as well as the historical subordination has led different actors to make efforts to maintain Azerbaijani language and revitalize Azerbaijani identity. However, the dominant Persian majority and the Islamic regime of Iran associate any discussion related to Azerbaijani language and its promotion with Pan-Turkic, separatist ideologies, which are said to jeopardize the unity of the nation. Such politicization, as Karimzad (2018) argues, does not allow alternative discourses in this regard to gain power and subsequently strengthens Azerbaijani nationalist

ideologies as the only authority that can define Azerbaijani identity and police Azerbaijani language practices. On the other hand, in recent years the Iranian Azerbaijanis' tendency to watch satellite TV programs broadcast from Turkey and the Republic of Azerbaijan has increased (Bani-Shoraka, 2005; Karimzad, 2018; Mirvahedi, 2012). The fact that, unlike Iranian Azerbaijani, the varieties of Turkic language spoken in these two countries are standardized and have official status under the control of a nation-state has created the idea that their varieties are "purer" and "less contaminated" than Iranian Azerbaijani (Karimzad, 2018). These social, cultural, and political conditions have resulted in the emergence of diverse ideologies among Azerbaijanis regarding what their mother tongue is, how it should be used, and what constitutes Azerbaijani identity. These heterogeneous ideologies are evident in Azerbaijanis' linguistic/semiotic practices on social media, some of which will be illustrated in this article.

## METHOD

This study is part of two larger ethnographic studies done by the first and second authors focusing on Iranian Azerbaijani and Tatar communities respectively. In this particular study, our approach is that of virtual or Internet ethnography (Androutsopoulos, 2006; Hine, 2000; Lenihan, 2011), which is complemented by our broader offline ethnographic observations as well as our perspective as members of the respective communities. Online ethnography allows us to study virtual environments in a nonparticipatory manner as a "lurker," i.e., "someone who reads messages posed to a public forum" but "does not respond to the group" (Hine, 2000, p. 106). We specifically use Androutsopoulos's (2008) Discourse-Centered Online Ethnography (DCOE) tool, which is devised for language-focused research on computer-mediated communication (CMC). This approach combines systematic observation of selected Web pages, collection of relevant data, and their analysis and interpretation with an aim "to illuminate relations between digital texts and their production and reception practices" (Androutsopoulos, 2008, p. 2). Given our focus, the relevant data for this study are those examples that illustrate the practices of purification. Therefore, it should be noted that we are not arguing that these practices generally occur among the members of these communities; instead, our goal is to show the processes through which linguistic purification is achieved and how they can be accounted for. In fact, these practices are only common among a minority of the members of these communities, but given the ideological power behind notions of monolingualism and linguistic purity (Karimzad & Catedral, 2017), they are the most vocal community members who claim sole authority to define legitimate language practices.

The initial stage of page selection and data collection was carried out based on the authors' personal contacts. That is, we started with the users who, given our familiarity, were identified as those who would be involved in explicit discussions about language and ethnic identity and/or would use certain "purified," marked linguistic forms. Tracing these users' activities helped us find other users, public pages/groups with similar linguistic and metapragmatic practices, which in turn linked us to more users and/or pages. At the end of this procedure, we had identified over 50 individual or public Facebook pages. Then we focused on a variety of activities these users were involved in, such as status updates, wall posts, and comments and replies. All of these Facebook users were Tatar-Russian and Azeri-Persian bilinguals living in Tatarstan and Azerbaijani-speaking regions in Iran respectively. Some participants were frequent posters and updated their pages at least a few times a week, while others did not show any activity on their pages for a week or even longer. The non-participatory observations were carried out for eight months (July 2015–March 2016), and over 80 Facebook activity instances were collected. The collected data were used for subsequent linguistic analyses.

We focused on two types of data: linguistic/semiotic practices and metapragmatic discourses. Specifically, we investigated how Azerbaijanis and Tatars Facebook users' explicit comments on



language use reveal their language ideologies and how these ideologies are linguistically/semiotically practiced. We looked at the instances of purification at different levels of linguistic features, from lexical items to orthography. Given our broader ethnographic observations as well as our perspective as members of the communities, in the cases when certain *marked* linguistic forms were used instead of the more common and unmarked forms, we tried to determine the motivational and ideological factors behind them. In particular, in any given linguistic instance of purification, we investigated the features that were considered foreign, the features they were replaced with, and the potential motivations for, and the indexicalities of, such linguistic practices.

## DATA ANALYSIS

### *Linguistic/semiotic practices of purification*

#### *Tatar*

Wertheim (2002, 2003) argues that one of the main drives for the Tatar purification movement is the fear of assimilation into Russian society. Thus, Tatar identity, as constructed through linguistic performance, is primarily defined through opposition to Russian language and culture, equating its survival with de-Russification (Wertheim, 2002). Russian language elements are recognized as “undesirable” and “foreign and in need of replacement.” In other words, “pure” Tatar must be “spoken in any domain and in any register, without any salient Russian interference” (Wertheim, 2002, p. 15). Speakers of “pure” Tatar adequate themselves with other Turkic-speaking peoples by creating indexical links between linguistic features of other Turkic languages—e.g., lexical items and orthography—with a perceived unified “Turkic” identity.

**Lexical items.** As part of the attempt to return to “roots” and revitalize Tatar language and identity, the use of Russian words or words of European origin adopted via Russian has been disapproved of among contemporary Tatar speakers. In particular, such de-Russification of Tatar has occurred in three ways: (1) returning to the Arabic or Persian loanwords that were used until the 1930s; (2) finding a relic form used before or contemporaneously with a loanword; and (3) coining new terminology using the native Turko-Tatar stock (Wertheim, 2002, pp. 18–19). On social media, the de-Russification ideology is revealed in the style and word choice of individual posts. The Tatar Facebook community generally follows the unspoken rule: If a post is in Tatar language, it should not be “contaminated” by Russian words; whereas English loanwords (in original orthography or transliterated) are tolerated.

In particular, Tatar users of social media tend to purify the lexical items that describe recent scientific and technological advancements. Often in such cases, there already exists a Russian term that is common among Tatars. However, the purists prefer to coin new terms or translate the existing Russian variants into Tatar. For instance, the Tatar equivalent for the English term “push-notification” used by Facebook users is *push-belderü*. This compound word consists of the English word “push” and the word of Turkic origin *belderü*, meaning “announcement or notification.” In many cases, new terms in Tatar are literal, word-for-word translations from Russian. Consider the recently introduced Tatar word *törü* meaning “minimize” (e.g., a browser window). Semantically, its meaning is close to the commonly used Russian word *svernut’*, as the roots of both of them have the meaning “to convolve,” which is not implied in the meaning of the English word.

Moreover, Facebook discussions on acute topics of this century, such as climate change, encourage users to (re)introduce certain concepts into Tatar. For instance, the word “environment” in Tatar is *tirä-yak mokhite*. This compound noun can serve as an example of the word-for-word translation from Russian *okruzhaiushchaia sreda* (literally meaning “surrounding space”). By using the Turkic word

*tirä-yak*, meaning “surrounding,” and *mokhit* derived from the Arabic *muḥīt* for “natural space,” these Tatars attempt to get rid of Russian influence on their language and hence “purify” it.

These examples show that the purification of lexical items in the Tatar Facebook community is a process aimed to replace Russian terms, preferably by Turkic or Arabic equivalents, to create an identity different from “Russianness.” In fact, while Russian words are disapproved of and attempted to be removed in “pure” Tatar, English and Arabic words are still tolerated, providing evidence that it is not the etymological purity of the language that is of concern for the purists, but instead, it is a matter of purifying the language from the elements associated with the language of “them.” That is, such practices of de-Russification help authenticate a “purer” ethnolinguistic identity.

**Orthography.** Purification on the level of orthography deals mainly with the Tatar phones that are not found in Russian language. As part of the Soviet policies, Tatar language script was changed from Arabic to Latin in 1926 and later to Cyrillic in 1938. To reflect the sounds that were missing in Russian, special symbols were added to both Latin and Cyrillic alphabets. Today, Tatars use the Cyrillic-based Russian alphabet with six additional symbols, which are not found in Russian: for three vowels—ə/æ/, ʏ/ʏ/, ø/ø/—and three consonants—Һ/һ/, Һ/Һ/, Җ/җ/(Wertheim, 2002, p. 14). In CMC, these additional symbols are often omitted, and the standard Russian alphabet is used instead. The purists, however, insist that the additional symbols be used on social media. Example (1), drawn from a discussion thread on Facebook, illustrates how significant the use of these symbols is for those who want to write in “pure” Tatar. In this example, the users discuss the necessity of installing a special keyboard to input the Tatar characters missing in the standard Russian keyboard. User A complains that nobody has invented a proper Tatar keyboard for his/her type of mobile device yet, implying that writing in the correct Tatar orthography takes too much time and effort. In doing so, s/he does not use special symbols but switches to Russian several times within a sentence. User B, on the other hand, gives a short but orthographically “correct” answer in Tatar, saying that “a normal keyboard,” which User A is asking for, will be necessary only for lazy people. User A disagrees with this idea, saying that s/he sees no connection between diligence and the long pressing of special keys; at the same time the user switches to more “sophisticated” Tatar in her/his response and “purifies” it from Russian words but keeps the previously used “incorrect” orthography as a strategy to disalign with User B. (The “incorrect” symbols are underlined.)

(1) A: *Vot chto meshaet tatarcha normal'nyi klaviatura eshlerge, chtob berkaya da ozagrak basyp torasy bulmasyn?*

B: *yalkaular öchen*

A: *Eie, elbette, kem nichek kure bit inde, eshchenleknen khereflerge berem-berem basuda agylganyn belmi idem:)*

A: ‘*What stops [RUS] them from inventing a normal [RUS] Tatar keyboard [RUS], so [RUS] one does not have to keep buttons pressed longer?*’ [There is a wrong agreement in gender and case in the phrase “normal keyboard”: The adjective should be in Fem. Acc. instead of Masc. Nom.]

B: ‘*For those who are lazy.*’

A: ‘*Yes, of course, everyone sees it differently, but I did not know that diligence manifests itself in pressing letters one by one [smile emoticon].*’

This example shows that Tatar purists insist on using the special symbols in the Cyrillic alphabet, in pursuit of promoting what is perceived as “correct” Tatar language. Consequently, users who ignore these special symbols are regarded as “lazy” and “disrespectful” toward their mother tongue, since they

do not try to keep the language “clean” and “pure.”

Another remarkable linguistic practice in the Tatar Facebook community is the intentional misspellings of the Russian words. Such examples are marked because they often occur in the posts of active members of the Tatar community, who are known as the main promoters of the “pure” Tatar and have enough educational background to avoid such mistakes. The mistakes are quite specific and reflect a speech pattern typical for Tatar village speakers, who have less language contact with Russians. Some practices stretch beyond the orthographic level and may involve morphological and grammatical changes.

(2) Singa turı kilgän fotolar mure.

‘There is a sea [plenty] of pictures that will fit to [what you are looking for]’.

(3) Bolay yazarga da yaramıydır inde, nepatriotishchnorak.

‘probably it should not be written like this, [it is somehow] unpatriotic’.

In example (2), the user misspells the Russian word for “sea,” reflecting the pronunciation of the word by a nonnative speaker. This orthographic “mistake” occurs in an accented syllable, which is phonotactically impossible in the utterance of a native Russian speaker. However, the replacement of the sound/o/by/u/in Russian words by Tatar language speakers is a frequent case and therefore is recognizable for other Tatars. Similarly, example (3) shows that the Russian adverb *nepatriotichno* for “unpatriotic” in the sentence in Tatar is also misspelled, reflecting the phonetic adaptation of the sound /tʃ/ in Russian, which some Tatars have difficulty pronouncing. The user also adds a Tatar suffix *-rak* to the Russian word, which signals the comparative form of the adverb in Tatar and makes the word fit into a Tatar speech. The phonological and morphological adaptations of this kind are typical for people from rural areas who often grow up in a monolingual Tatar setting and receive their secondary education exclusively in Tatar. Their usually lower levels of proficiency in Russian also impede further specialized education and, consequently, social mobility (Mukhariamova, Morenko, Petrova, & Salakhadinova, 2004, p. 61). The fact that these elements occur in the speech of a highly educated urban Tatar speaker marks them as a deliberate sociolinguistic move, which shows the aspiration of the speaker to differentiate him/herself from Russianness.

These acts aim to authenticate the language practices of Tatar village inhabitants, i.e., older generations, indexing that their language is “purer” than the language of the contemporary Tatar youth. By transforming a Russian word in a way that it resembles the speech of a Tatar villager, the purists show their awareness of the fact that their posts in Tatar contain “unnatural” (Russian) elements, thereby trying to “dissimilate” themselves from Russianness.

### *Azerbaijani*

The language policing practices in Azerbaijani are motivated by two main ideologies: “correctness” and “pureness” ideologies (Karimzad, 2018). Both of these ideologies have “the ideal monolingual speaker” at their core. The “correctness” ideology mainly favors speaking as monolingually as possible and also considers diachronic and synchronic changes that the language has gone/is going through as “harmful” to the language. As a result, the proponents of “correctness” ideology make analogies with other Turkic languages to find and use the “correct” linguistic forms. On the other hand, the “pureness” ideology, which entails the first ideology as well, concerns the process of differentiating Azerbaijani identity from that of Persians, i.e., de-Persianization of the Azerbaijani language and identity. The “pureness” ideology is favored by the nationalist separatists who prefer a more “Turkic identity” as opposed to an



Iranian Azerbaijani identity, while the “correctness” ideology is less about differentiating from Iranian identity and adequating with other Turkic groups and more about using the perceived correct forms of the language.

**Lexical items.** Replacement of lexical items is the most common way of purifying the language among Azerbaijani purists. The benchmark for deciding what words should be replaced is whether or not they are associated with Persian. What they should be replaced with, in turn, is determined by whether or not the alternative word is associated with a Turkic language, usually Turkish and/or North Azerbaijani. The main purpose of these purification practices is highlighting their differences with Persians and adequating with other Turkic groups.

Let us now look at examples of how the Azerbaijani words for “photo/picture” are replaced. The commonly used lexical item for “photo/picture” in the Azerbaijani spoken in Iran is *æhs* (also *ækis/ækiz* in some dialects). The word *æhs* is borrowed from the Persian word *æks* <عکس>, which etymologically comes from the Arabic ‘*akasa*’ <عكس> meaning “to reverse/reflect/mirror.” This word is phonologically nativized in Azerbaijani to comply with the phonotactics of the language and avoid the /ks/ consonant cluster. In the following examples, we will see how this word is replaced by presumably more “Turkic” words.

- (4) *Videolar və şəkillər*  
‘videos and pictures’
- (5) *Sağ ol. bu arxiv fotolar məndə yoxdur*  
‘Thank you. I don’t have these archived photos’

Example (4) is taken from the name of a Facebook page that shares videos and pictures mostly related to Azerbaijani music and culture. As illustrated, the word *şəkil*, a common North Azerbaijani word meaning “image, picture” is used instead of the more common Iranian Azerbaijani word *æhs*. Etymologically, this word comes from the Arabic word *şakl* <شكل>, which means “shape, form.” Taking into account the facts that (1) the word *æks* also exists in North Azerbaijani but might be less common; and (2) etymologically both lexical items have Arabic roots, we can see that the underlying motivation for such linguistic practices is to replace the words that are associated with Persian with those associated with North Azerbaijani. Example (5), on the other hand, is a comment under a Facebook post concerning a series of old pictures of Tabriz, the largest Azerbaijani-speaking city in Iran. In this example, the North Azerbaijani *foto*, which is taken from the English word *photo(graph)*, is used instead of *æhs*. Similarly, it is its association with North Azerbaijani that makes this word sound more “Turkic” and hence more “authentic,” while the naturally nativized word *æhs* would reveal the influence of Persian on the Azerbaijani spoken in Iran and thus index “inauthenticity” and “impurity.”

Such practices of purification can be best understood in terms of the processes of distinction and adequation. That is, in order for these purists to differentiate themselves from “Persianness” and highlight their similarities with other Turkic groups, they opt to replace the words associated with Persian with the ones that are associated with other Turkic languages, especially Turkish and North Azerbaijani. Given the fact that, due to the sociopolitical history of the region, not only Iranian Azerbaijani and Persian but also Turkish and North Azerbaijani have been influenced by Arabic, it is evident that such purification is achieved through the social associations of the linguistic features with “us” and “them” and not from a (nonsocial) linguistic perspective. Hence, these acts of de-Persianization, as we saw, may not lead to an etymologically pure Azerbaijani, but they help the purists authenticate a “purer” ethnolinguistic identity.

**Orthography.** The Azerbaijani spoken in Iran does not have a standard written form, and as a result, there is no consensus among Azerbaijanis on how it should be written. In fact, prior to the emergence of CMC, Azerbaijanis in Iran did not have the chance to practice the written version of their language, since Persian, as the only official language of Iran, has been used in institutional and 405 educational contexts. When text-based communications such as text messaging or instant messaging became popular, Azerbaijanis found the opportunity to write in their language. At first, they started to use the English alphabet to write in Azerbaijani. Although the English alphabet lacks many different sounds that exist in Azerbaijani, such as /y/, /œ/, and /u/, Azerbaijani CMC users have developed shared sets of conventions for written communication. This is still the most common 410 and least monitored way of writing on social media among younger generations of Azerbaijanis.

The use of Persian/Arabic script or the North Azerbaijani/Turkish alphabet are the other common orthographies for the Iranian Azerbaijani. The former is usually associated with those who do not distance themselves from their Iranian identity but still consider monolingualism as the ideal, and the latter is associated more with purist, nationalist ideologies. Understanding what these orthographic choices index; however, is relatively less straightforward. To determine what these 415 orthographic choices index, we also need to look at the other linguistic practices, such as lexical and/or morphosyntactic structure choices.

(6) بابا ملت بو یازی درآمدلین اوستونده متمرکز دییر ، برنامه ریزی لرین اوستون ده متمرکز دی ... و (6)

صرفا بیر طنز باخشی وار

‘People! The focus of this note is not on the income, it is focused on their planning... . It is just having a sarcastic view.’

(7) هدف طنز ده اولسا.. گرک مثالار دوز سنجیله. منده بیلیرم سوز آلماندا دییل، اما بو یازنین ناخودآگاهیندا (7)

مشکلر وار

‘Even if the goal is being sarcastic, the examples should be chosen correctly. I also know that the focus is not Germany, but this note is subconsciously problematic.’

Examples (6) and (7) are taken from a thread of comments under a Facebook post sarcastically comparing the average income and expenses in Iran and Germany, hinting at how difficult it is to make ends meet in Iran. Some Facebook users challenge the validity of the numbers given in this note regarding the average income in Germany. Example (6) is a response by the user who has shared this joke, clarifying what s/he thinks its focus is. Looking at his/her orthographic choice, which is Arabic/Persian script, and lexical choices, for example *dæra:mæd* <درآمد> [income], *motæmærkəz* <متمرکز> [concentrated], *bærnamerizi* <برنامه ریزی> [planning], and *tænz* <طنز> [sarcasm], which are Persian or Arabic words borrowed from Persian, we realize that, while s/he opts for Arabic/Persian script, the linguistic practices of this user are not of a purist nature. Example (7) is a response to the comment made by the Facebook user in example (6). Interestingly, the user responding to this comment, who was using the North Azerbaijani alphabet in his previous comment in this thread, aligns with the orthography preferred by the other user. This is, we argue, a move to establish solidarity and focus more on the content of the message than the differences in the writing forms. However, taking some of his lexical choices, especially *gæræk* <گرک> meaning “should” and *dæyil* <دییل> meaning “is not,” into account, we can notice the differences in their language use. In the Azerbaijani variety spoken by these users, /k/ changes to /h/ in word final positions. Since the phonotactics of the language does not allow /k/ in word final positions, *gæræk* has been established as *gæræh* in this variety. Also, given that the similarities in the articulatory properties of /l/ and /r/, *dæyil* <دییل>, which is the common pronunciation in North Azerbaijani (in Turkish, it is *değil*), have historically been reanalyzed as *dæyir* <دییر>, which is what the user in example (6) uses as the common word in this variety. The ideology motivating the linguistic practices we observe in example (7) can be said to be less about “purity” and

more about “correctness” (Karimzad, 2018). That is, unlike the purists, such language users are less concerned about getting rid of Persian influence—as the person in example (7) uses the Persian borrowed words such as *naxodagah* <ناخودگاه> [subconscious]—but focus more on (1) speaking as monolingually as possible and (2) making sure that synchronic and diachronic changes do not “harm” the language. The idea of what the “correct” forms are is usually motivated through analogical analysis of the linguistic forms in their own language with their counterparts in other Turkic languages, especially North Azerbaijani and Turkish (Karimzad, 2018).

Let us now look at example (8) and revisit one of the examples from the previous section, which is repeated here for convenience.

(8) بو گورونتو بیزه عایید دییل

‘This picture doesn’t belong to us’

(9) Sağ ol. bu arxiv fotolar məndə yoxdur

‘Thank you. I don’t have these archived photos.’

Even though two different orthographic forms are used in examples (8) and (9), they both illustrate purist linguistic practices. Example (8) is a response to a comment criticizing a picture shared by a page. The picture includes an Azerbaijani poem, which is written in the spoken form. The administrator of the page is trying to avoid responsibility for the text used in this picture and explains that s/he only approves of the meaning of the poem. In doing so, s/he uses Persian/Arabic orthography. However, looking at the lexical and morphosyntactic choices, we can see the purist attempts by this user. First of all, the word *görüntü* <گورونتو> used by this user instead of *əhs*, meaning “picture,” does not exist in the Azerbaijani used in Iran. Even in Turkish, with which it is associated, this word is not very common, and if ever used, it refers more to a “view” rather than a “picture.” Moreover, the North Azerbaijani *aid dəyil* (or Turkish *ait değil*) meaning “not belong” is another structure that is not common in the Azerbaijani spoken in Iran. The Azerbaijanis in Iran use *raje?* <راجع>, i.e., *raje? dəyir* (or *dəyil* in some dialects), instead of *aid* <عایید>. Interestingly, both of these words come from Arabic roots, *raja* ‘a <رَجَعَ> and <ع و د> (-w-d) respectively, meaning “to return.” However, it is the association of *raje?* with Persian and *aid* with North Azerbaijani and/or Turkish that leads to the avoidance of the former and its replacement with the latter. Example (9), on the other hand, illustrates the purist practices using the North Azerbaijani alphabet. Besides the use of *foto* instead of the more common Azeri words, which were discussed in the previous section, the choice of *arxiv* meaning “archive” is also interesting. In the Azerbaijani spoken in Iran, the common word for “archive” is *arshiv*, which is shared with Persian and Turkish. This demonstrates how, in fact, it is not the etymological Turkicness that the purists are concerned with; instead, it is about differentiating themselves from Persianness/Iranianness by attempting to avoid any linguistic features associated/shared with Persian.

The examples we looked at here reveal that the linguistic/semiotic practices of the members of the Azerbaijani community on social media are motivated by a continuum of ideologies from writing as they naturally speak to monolingual and “correct” language use and finally to “pure” and more “authentic” use of language (Karimzad, 2018). We illustrated that, although different orthographic choices might be associated with different ideologies, understanding their indexical functions requires a close analysis of multiple layers of linguistic/semiotic practices.

## METAPRAGMATIC DISCOURSES OF PURISM

### *Tatar*

**“Only villagers speak pure Tatar.”** As mentioned in the part on orthography, there is an ideology in the Tatar Facebook community that presents the language of rural area inhabitants as the example of “pure” Tatar. Such a discourse aims to transform the popular perception among Tatar youth dating back to late 1990s, which associated speaking Tatar with rural, poorly educated Tatars coming to big industrial cities of the republic to try their luck. The common assumption was that these settlers would speak Tatar because they simply had no or too little knowledge of Russian to communicate in it fluently. This popular perception, however, has drastically changed since the 2000s. In fact, the “villagers’ language” has been promoted as an example of “correct” and “pure” Tatar. In example (10), a user, who appears to live in a city, expressed his/her fascination by listening to “the village language” on a radio station, which s/he describes as “pure” (saf), “correct” (tözek), and “perfect” (kamil):

- (10) Häm berzaman 67,79 dulkännän saf tatar tele agıla... . Shähär bulıp shähärdä „avıl telendä“ cöylilär! Radiodan! Tapshıruları saf tatar telendä, jırları—tatarcha, alıp baralar matur itep, tel tözek, chista, kamil—ürnäk ölgese!

‘And all of a sudden on the 67,79 radio station a pure Tatar starts to flow... . Even in a city [people] speak the “village language”! On the radio! The programs are in pure Tatar language, songs are in Tatar,[the presenters] speak beautifully, the language is correct, clean, perfect—[it is] an example to follow!’

This example points to the ideology present among Tatar Facebook users that “pure” Tatar language has been maintained in rural areas and especially among elderly speakers. The reason for such an assumption is that many village inhabitants have less contact with Russian language and are proficient only in Tatar, which have refrained their language from “contaminations.”

**Mankurtism.** Another prominent topic around Tatar language and ideology is “mankurtism.” The term gained a wide usage across the post-Soviet space after the publication of Chingiz Aitmatov’s book, *The Day Lasts More Than a 100 Years*. Aitmatov narrates a Kyrgyz legend of a war prisoner, who turned into a mankurt—an unthinking slave, and was unable to recognize his own mother. In contemporary Tatar discourse, the term refers to those members of the community who have abandoned or have never embraced their heritage culture and the elements of Tatar identity.

Example (11) is taken from a thread of comments under a video posted on Facebook, in which a Tatar politician was delivering a speech in Russian in the State Council of the Republic. The Facebook users involved in this thread are criticizing this politician for using Russian and not his native language while addressing the audience. A user sees it as a sign of mankurtism, arguing that Tatar officials have become slaves of the Russian governmental system and are not able to speak their native language anymore:

- (11) Mankortlar ... Kollık psikhologiyäse tatar türäsenä ber yabışsa, anı tiz genä kubarıp alıp bulmıy inde... .  
‘Mankurts ... If psychology of a slave sticks to a Tatar bureaucrat, it is not easy to scrape it away quickly... .’

The Tatar community is also concerned that the current education policies in Tatarstan might breed

mankurts (see “Background” part on Tatars). It is believed that if education in and of Tatar ceased in the villages, it would have negative consequences for the cultural upbringing of children and their language acquisition.

Through these metapragmatic comments, Facebook users denaturalize the identities of those Tatars who speak Russian and those who are not sufficiently proficient in their native language. The derogative term *mankurt* implies that these people are victims of their environment due to their close coexistence with Russians, which made them forget their original national identity.

Both of the ideologies discussed in this part, i.e., the “pure” Tatar of rural inhabitants and the ill language proficiency of *mankurts*, can be found in the metapragmatic discourses of many Tatar Facebook users, making this community more homogenized regarding the ideologies about “pure” language and “authentic” identity. Such homogeneity, we argue, is a result of the standardization processes that Tatar language has undergone—in contrast to Azerbaijani—in the course of the Soviet language management.

### *Azerbaijani*

**“Do not ruin ‘türkçe!’”** Example (12) illustrates the language policing practices of the Azerbaijani purists. It is a comment criticizing the language used in a poem, which was posted along with a picture on a Facebook page. In the previous section (Example 8), we illustrated the page administrator’s response to this comment avoiding responsibility for the text (*Bu görüntü bizə aid dəyil* [This 545 picture doesn’t belong to us]) and asserting that they only approved of its content. Now, let us see what was in fact criticized about this post:

(12) *yazıqlar olsun doğrudan ...*

خ یوخ ق اولاجاق

آچماق = باز کردن

آشماق = از روی چیزی پریدن

لوطفا تورکجه نی آرادان آپارماین

‘It is a shame/you should be ashamed, really ...

It should be ‘q’ not ‘x’

*açmaq* = to open (defined in Persian)

*aşmaq* = to jump/cross over something (defined in Persian)

Please, do not ruin Turkish.’

The focus of the criticism in this comment is the use of spoken form of the language in writing. It is particularly targeting the two different types of phonological alternations that are very common in the varieties of Azerbaijani spoken in Iran. Specifically, /q/ <ق> *asinaçmaq* <آچماق>, is used in Standard North Azerbaijani and is therefore considered to be the underlying “correct” form. However, this form does not occur in particular environments in many of the Iranian Azerbaijani dialects. Instead, it is realized as /x/ <خ> in word final and/or preconsonantal contexts, and as /ɣ/ <غ> intervocalically. In addition, /ç/, which is pronounced as /tʃ/ in Standard North Azerbaijani and Turkish and is realized as /t/ s/ in many Iranian dialects, alternates with /f/ in word final and/or preconsonantal environments. As a result of these two phonological processes, the words for “to open” and “to jump/cross over something,” which are differentiated by this Facebook user, have become homophonic and are both pronounced as /afmax/. The poem that is being criticized here used the spoken form of the language (e.g., *aşmax* <آشماخ> to mean “to open”), which forced this Facebook user to react to the language use. Such use of language is in fact considered unacceptable and shameful by this Facebook user. In particular, s/he uses the expression *yazıqlar olsun* (also *yazıklar olsun* in Turkish) [It is a shame/you should be ashamed], which is not used in Iranian Azerbaijani, to state how “catastrophic” such language use is. Then, the



“correct” forms of the words are presented along with their Persian definitions to make a distinction between them. This is followed by a request not to ruin the language. Interestingly, the word used to refer to the language, i.e., Türkçe <تورکجه>, is what is used in Turkish to refer to the Turkish language. This, in fact, points to the nationalistic, i.e., so-called pan-Turkic, ideology that there is a single “correct” form of the Turkic language that all Turks should use, one that is better maintained and is “purer” and “stronger” in Turkey and the Republic of Azerbaijan. While creating distinction from them, the user is also arguing that we are ruining it by such linguistic practices. This is what Karimzad (2018) refers to as self-subordination, a process in which the variety of the Azerbaijani we are speaking is devalued and instead the varieties spoken by other Turkic groups, specifically the Turkish and North Azerbaijanis, are elevated as “purer” and more “authentic.”

**“Speak your own mother tongue!”** Unlike the case of Tatar, in which the process of standardization has led to more homogenized ideologies of the Tatar language and identity, and the majority of Tatars agree with the purist practices, Iranian Azerbaijanis have developed more diverse attitudes toward these practices. While some people consider such language use as “pure” and “strong” Azerbaijani, others question the authenticity and legitimacy of these practices. The following example illustrates how such linguistic practices and their authenticity are challenged.

(13) آنا دیلی

منیم عزیز دوستوم، آنا دیلی گوجنپ یکه یکه لو غتلر ایستخراج الیپ او آل بو آله یازماخ دییر! آنا دیلینه یازماخ چوخ ساده ادی!

آنان سنی هانسی لو غتلرین دانیشدیرپ، دیل آشمیسان، سنین آنا دیلیندی

همانلاری ایشلت، زورا توشمه، چپیه چالماغا آلتیش دماغینان اصالت آله گلمز

طرف منه گلیپ دییر “منه بله گلیر کی...”! “ایندیسه قلی بی گلر” اولان اوز دیلوی دانیش دا! کوچه باجادا نه دانیشیسان بوردادا همانی دانیش! به نیه فیسیوکدا اوزووی گوزدن سالیسان؟

‘Mother tongue!

My dear friend! Mother tongue is not about trying hard to extract “big” words from here and there and using them in writing. Writing in mother tongue is very simple.

Through whatever words your mom has talked to you and you learned to speak, it is your mother tongue.

Use the same [words]. Do not put yourself under pressure. Using ‘alqış’ [applaud] in North Azerbaijani instead of ‘chəpih’ ([clap] in Iranian Azerbaijani) does not bring about “authenticity.”

Some guy was telling me, “məənə belə gəlir ki ...”! [It occurs to me that ...] (North Azerbaijani structure) “İndisi Qulı bəygələr” [now Mr. Quli will come] In North Azerbaijani). Boy, speak your own language. Whatever language you speak out there (outside Internet), use the same language here [on Facebook]. Why are you making a fool out of yourself on Facebook?'

Through his/her metapragmatic comment, this Facebook user is criticizing the linguistic practices of the Azerbaijani purists on Facebook. S/he is specifically pointing to the lexical and morphosyntactic choices of the purists who claim they are trying to maintain their mother tongue, asserting that these words and structures do not belong to their mother tongue. S/he provides a definition for “mother tongue,” stating that their mother tongue is simply the language they have learned to speak as they were growing up and is not something people should search for. This is, in a sense, referring to the dominant discourses of the nationalists who identify themselves as “identity seekers” and claim authority to define Azerbaijani language and identity (Karimzad, 2018). This Facebook user is explicitly denaturalizing the authenticity of the identities that are being constructed through purist practices and also illegitimizing the authority claimed by the purists. Finally, s/he points to the fact that these practices are not common outside of social media, and in fact, it is the social media that give them the opportunity to

consciously “extract” lexical items and morphosyntactic structures in order to sound more “authentic.”

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we have examined the linguistic and metalinguistic practices of purism on Facebook. Focusing on the data coming from Tatar and Iranian Azerbaijani communities, we argue that purification practices, which deal with getting rid of foreign linguistic features, can be better understood as identity work. “Foreignness,” then, can be considered more of a socio-political construct rather than a result of mere linguistic differences. That is, “foreignness” of the linguistic features is determined based on whether they are associated with the language(s) of “them,” from whom the members of a community want to differentiate themselves. In turn, these foreign elements, regardless of their etymological roots, are replaced by the features associated with the language(s) of those with whom they want to adequate (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004a, 2004b, 2005).

We also argued that Bucholtz and Hall’s (2004a, 2004b, 2005) tactics of intersubjectivity offer a helpful lens to examine purification practices, allowing us to see how new “iconic models” (Catedral, 2017; Irvine & Gal, 2000) are constructed, negotiated, and/or challenged. In the case of Tatar and Azerbaijani communities, we illustrated that, despite significant commonalities in the current position of their native languages vis-à-vis the hegemonic languages, their linguistic/semiotic practices of purification on Facebook have salient differences. While the Tatar community appears to have more homogeneous ideologies about what “pure” Tatar is and what constitutes Tatar identity, the practices observed among Azerbaijanis reveal more diverse understandings of these notions. We argued that such homogeneity and heterogeneity are largely due to the differences in the language policies in Iran and Russia. Unlike the Azerbaijani spoken in Iran, Tatar has an official status in Tatarstan and has gone through standardization processes. Standardization, as Bucholtz and Hall (2004a) argue, leads to “the imposition of a homogeneous national identity in which modern elites and speakers who once held traditional authority have very different roles” (p.386). It is the lack of such standardization in the Iranian Azerbaijani language that has led to diverse ideologies about mother tongue and identity among its speakers and can indeed explain the heterogeneity of their linguistic and metalinguistic practices of purification.

Finally, we argued that, while practices of purification for minority language users are to a great extent limited to metapragmatic discourses in offline contexts, social media provides them with a unique venue to also practice their ideologies linguistically and semiotically. The speakers of Tatar and Azerbaijani rarely find the chance to exercise the written forms of their languages, since the majority languages are used in almost all formal situations; hence, social media becomes the only space for them to linguistically practice their ideologies of purism, giving them the chance to consciously monitor/select their linguistic choices. Also, while social media have been discussed more in terms of the informality of the linguistic forms utilized by their users, we illustrated how, given the sociopolitical and sociolinguistic circumstances of certain communities, they can indeed be used to practice what is perceived to be formal language.

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