

Giving Advice - Part 13

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Advice—whether it is solicited or not—has always been considered by Azerbaijanis to have great value. When deciding on a major purchase or dealing with a problem, Azerbaijanis are likely to seek out the advice of close friends and family. Similarly, they tend to ask for advice from co-workers and associates before closing a business deal. In this 13th installment of “Sociolinguistically Speaking,” we take a look at Azerbaijanis’ common tendency to give and seek out advice.

Many Azerbaijani proverbs talk about the importance of seeking out advice:

Məsləhətli don gen olar.

A dress made with advice won't be [too] tight.

Məsləhətlə atılan daş uzağa gedər.

A stone thrown with advice will go far.

Məsləhətli aşı dadlı olar.

A meal based on advice will be tasty.



Since Azerbaijan is a society in which verbal communication is very important, advice-taking and advice-giving play a prominent role. Whenever Azerbaijanis undertake something serious, they seek out the advice of friends or relatives who they believe have had relevant experiences.

For example, before undergoing medical treatment, sending their children to a certain school or starting a repair on a house, Azerbaijanis tend to ask their friends and relatives for referrals.

Like Azerbaijanis, Westerners seek and rely on referrals for important decisions. A homeowner is much more likely to trust a construction contractor who comes highly recommended by a neighbor rather than someone who has been randomly selected from an advertisement.

But Azerbaijanis tend to ask for advice on a broader scale—on many more details and in many more facets of their lives. They readily ask for or give advice on topics such as what to name a child, what to wear to a certain event, or what to take as a gift to a party.

ADVICE FROM THE ELDERLY

The concept of the *ağsaqqal sözü* (literally, “word of the white-bearded one”) is very strong in the minds of Azerbaijanis. When undertaking something serious, they especially seek the advice of elderly people.

There is a tendency among today's young people to be more independent and not consult with their elders as much. Maybe they think that any advice given by an elderly person would be out-of-date. But as they grow more mature, they are more likely to realize that it doesn't matter what political or economic system you grow up under, life's problems are often the same.

ADVICE ON MARRIAGE

In many Azerbaijani families, especially traditional families, the practice of seeking advice from the elderly about a future spouse for a son or daughter is still very alive. Parents who “put an eye” (*gözaltı eləmək*) on a girl for their son will take the initiative to go and talk to elderly relatives or friends. Not doing so might even hurt the feelings of these elderly people, who might complain by saying:

Niyə məsləhətləşməmiş iş görürsünüz/addım atırsınız?
Why do you do things/take steps without advice?

Çox yaxşı, amma belə bir iş görəndə məsləhətləşmək də lazımdır.
Very good, but when you take up such things, you should take advice.

Belə iş olanda bir böyüklə də məsləhətləşin.

When you take up such things, consult with the elderly.

Elderly relatives like to take an active part in the lives of their children and younger relatives. Aunts and uncles often initiate help and advice as well. Depriving relatives of such a role would make them feel unwanted.

Even as traditions change and young people become more independent, they still feel it is very important to talk to their parents, share their feelings and get their opinions or advice.

For example, almost all parents feel the need to be closely involved in their child's marriage, even if they do not intend to impose their own choice. Especially in modern families, parents aren't likely to go against the choice of their children unless they highly disapprove.

ADVICE ON EDUCATION

Parental advice is also very important when choosing one's future vocation. It is not uncommon to find young girls with medical diplomas who will tell you: “I didn't want to be a doctor; it was my family's advice.” Many of them later feel that they made the right choice. But only a few were interested in become doctors at the age of 16 or 17, when they had to make their initial choices of study.

Azerbaijani parents tend to think that being a doctor or a teacher is a good career for a daughter. They say:

Qız uşağıdır, ya həkim olacaq, ya da müəllim.

This is a girl—she will become either a doctor or a teacher.

Perhaps they want to make sure that their daughter has “a piece of bread” (*bir tikə çörək*), in case something happens and she has to support herself and her family.

Many parents don't think that giving career advice is an imposition on their children. They justify their deep involvement by saying that their children are not old enough yet to make the correct decisions:

Uşaqdır, hələ başa düşmür.

He/she is a child, he/she doesn't understand yet.

Eybi yoxdur, indi başa düşmür, amma böyüyəndə bizə çox sağ ol deyəcəkdir.

It's OK. He/she does not understand now, but he/she will thank us when he/she grows up.

ADVICE ON PURCHASES

Parents and elderly relatives expect to be asked for advice when young people buy an important piece of property, such as house, car or dacha (Russian for “summer home”, “bağ” in Azeri).

If the children fail to ask for advice, the older relatives might feel hurt and even try to “wound” them a little:

Niyə bizimlə məsləhətləşmədin? Biz daha yaxşısını seçərdik.

Why didn't you consult with us? We would have advised a better choice.

FREE ADVICE

Most Azerbaijanis don't understand the practice of giving advice for compensation. Westerners, on the other hand, are used to paying for professional advice—whether it's from a career counselor, life coach, marriage therapist or fashion consultant.

Older Azerbaijanis in particular don't understand how people like consultants can charge for words. “How can you sell words?” they say. Of course, those who have exposure to the business world understand that these “words” represent valuable experience.

It's not unusual for Azerbaijanis to offer free advice if they hear you have a problem:

Gəl otur, məsləhətləşək.

Come, we will sit and consult together.

Even complete strangers can benefit from advice, they believe. For example, at the market an Azerbaijani may go up to a foreigner and tell him or her which fruit or vegetables to buy, expecting that the foreigner may not be familiar with the products that are available.

Bunu götür, bu yaxşıdır/daha yaxşıdır.

Take this. This is good/better.

The phrases *məsləhətdir* (it is advisable) and *məsləhət deyil* (it is not advisable) are used in many situations:

A: İstəyirəm bu gün başa gedim.

B: Məsləhət deyil / Məsləhət görmürəm. Hava yağışlıdır.

A: I want to go to the summer home.

B: It is not advisable / I don't recommend it. The weather is rainy.

Məsləhətdir/məsləhət görürəm, bir bu evə də baxasan. Onun üstünlükləri daha çoxdur. It is advisable / I advise that you take a look at this apartment. It has more advantages.

This tendency to give advice is also reflected in the Azerbaijanis' choice of verbs. Even when speaking in English, an Azerbaijani is likely to use the modal expression “you should” rather than these more typical English patterns:

Mən olsaydım...

I would...

Biz adətən...

We usually...

Sometimes foreigners are taken by surprise by this tendency to advise and may even become offended. For example, in a casual conversation between an Azerbaijani and a foreigner on the subject of child rearing, the Azerbaijani might say: “You should start giving your child music lessons at quite an early age.”

A foreigner, unfamiliar with such practices, might take this as an affront. In the West, this idea would more likely be phrased as: “We usually start giving music education at an early age,” or “I think it would be a good idea to start your child with music lessons at an early age.”

ADVICE ON FAMILY MATTERS

Azerbaijanis feel comfortable offering unsolicited advice on personal matters. For example, if there is a problem between a wife and a husband, and a close friend feels that he might be able to solve their problem and prevent further difficulties, he'll consider it his duty to get involved. Not getting involved would mean that he was unwilling to help.

In the West, this is often viewed as an intrusion. It would be considered rude to give unsolicited advice, especially in the areas of child rearing, household management and spousal relationships.

But in Azerbaijan, close friends, parents, uncles and aunts feel free to get involved and try to solve the problem. If the advice is not taken and the problem continues, the elderly parents or relatives will often say:

Məsləhətimizə qulaq asmırlar, ona görə də belə olur.

They didn't listen to our advice, that's why it happened that way.

For instance, older women might feel it necessary to advise a young woman with only one child to give birth to another:

Biri azdır, qoy biri də olsun.

One is not enough, let there be another.

CAUTION IN GIVING ADVICE

Azerbaijanis are hesitant about giving advice to older people. If they have something to say, they will preface their advice with an apology or disclaimer by saying:

Məsləhət vermürəm, amma

I don't advise, but...

Məsləhət kimi başa düşməyin, amma...

Don't understand this as advice, but...

Elə bilməyin ki, sizə məsləhət vermək istəyirəm...



Azerbaijanis value passing time with friends, as shown in this print by Alakbar Rezaguliyev (1903-1974). Giving advice is a matter of course.

Don't think I'm going to give you advice...

Such care might also be taken when one talks to a stranger or acquaintance. Before offering advice, an Azerbaijani might ask:

Məsləhət versəm inciməzsiniz ki?

Would you be offended if I advised you?

Məsləhət kimi çıxmasın, amma

Don't take this as advice, but...

Advice to the foreigner: If an Azerbaijani offers unsolicited advice, don't be offended. Just say thanks: *çox sağ ol*. Chances are, they're just trying to be helpful and feel close enough to watch out for your welfare.

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