

## Numbers: Expressing Quantity and Quality - Part 17



by Jala Garibova

**H**ow do Azerbaijanis use numbers? Are there differences in the way numbers are used in Azeri and English? Of course, numbers are used in counting, but there are many other occasions that numbers are used to express other concepts such as time and distance, degrees of quality, frequency or intensity of action, probability, certainty, exaggeration, emphasis and approximation.

This is the 17th installment of "Sociolinguistically Speaking". This series examines language in its social context as spoken in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. The entire series is available on our Web site—AZERI.org. Click LEARN AZERI.

Some of the previous topics in this series include: Saying Hello, Saying Goodbye, Apologizing, Concepts of Time, Giving Advice, Respect for the Elderly, Rearing Children, Taboos and Euphemisms, Holidays in Azerbaijan, Weddings, Birth and Death.



Betty Blair

### SACRED NUMBERS

As in every language, Azeri has numbers and number sequences that are used more frequently and which are considered more sacred than others. For example, certain days following a person's death are considered sacred, especially the 3rd, 7th and 40th day. Sometimes, even the 52nd day is observed, though the 40th day is considered the most sacred of all.

Usually, friends and family gather at the home of the families of the deceased on these specified days, as well as every Thursday (the day before Friday which is the Holy Day of the week for Muslims) leading up to the 40th day when the major commemoration is held. Again, on the annual anniversary date of a person's death, many family members and friends visit the grave.

The number "40" also plays a significant role at the birth of a child. After returning home, the mother and her new-born remain in relative confinement during those first 40 days. Very few family members or friends are allowed to visit them during this period. It is believed that the baby is quite vulnerable and should not be exposed to any illness or bad omen; otherwise, it might fall ill. When people finally do visit after the 40th day, they usually bring a gift of money or clothing.

The number "13" is considered unlucky, but the concept seems to have been borrowed from Russian. For example, many Azerbaijanis consider "Friday the 13th" to be unlucky.

### ABBREVIATING NUMBERS

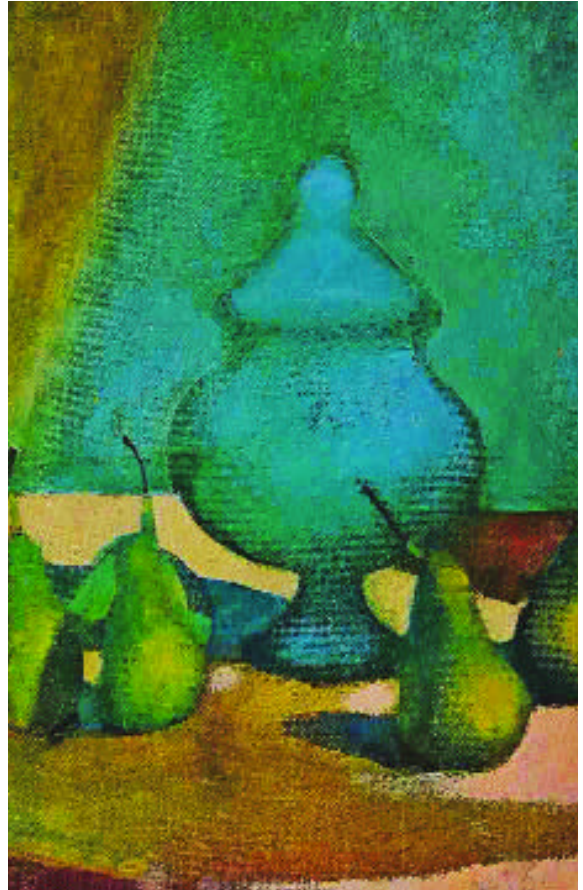
Azerbaijanis have a tendency to abbreviate some of their monetary bills. They call the bill representing 10,000 manats (approximately \$2) "b: şirvə" or "one Shirvan" because the illustrated art featured the Shirvanshah Palace, which was built in the 15th century in what is known as the "Old City" (Inner City) of Baku.

### ABSTRACT USE OF NUMBERS

In addition to numbers being used to count concrete items, numbers are often used to express abstract notions such as proximity, excellence or worthlessness, exaggeration and aggravation.

### PROXIMITY

Numbers such as "2" (ik "3" (üç and "5" (be are often used to express nearness or proximity.



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**Buradan ora qədər iki addım yoldur.**

It's two steps away.

Literally: It's in "a two-step distance", implying that it is "very close".

**Buradan ora qədər beş dəqiqəlik yoldur.**

It's five minutes away.

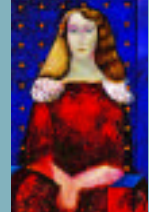
Literally: It's in "a five-minute distance" again, meaning "close".

**İki addımlıqda yaşayırsan, amma işə vaxtında gəlib çatmırsan.**

You live two steps away, but you still can't manage to get to work on time.

### WORTHLESSNESS

The number "two", more often than "three", is used with the word "qəp" (penny) to indicate worthlessness. This expression is often used to indicate work of low standard. Note that "kopeks" (qəp is a unit of the Russian ruble, which was used as the official currency during the Soviet period. The expression is still in use today although officially the monetary unit has been the manat since 1991 when Azerbaijan gained its independence.



LILA HƏSƏNƏVƏ

**Onun gördüyü iş iki qəpiyə dəyməz.**  
The work he did is not worth two kopeks.

**İki qəpiklik ağı yoxdur.**  
He / she doesn't even have brains worth two kopeks.  
Meaning: He or she is very stupid.

**Elədiyi iş iki qəpiklik deyil, ancaq danışığına bax.**  
What he did is not worth two kopeks, but look how he talks.

Here are some other expressions related to worthlessness:

**İkisi birinə dəyməz, biri də heçə.**  
Two are not worth [even] one, and one is worth nothing.

## URGENCY

The number "two", more often than "three" or "five", is used with time-related words such as "minute" or "second" to express speed and urgency.

**İki dəqiqə gözlə, gəlirəm.**  
Wait for two minutes, I'll be there.

**İki saniyəyə hazırım.**  
I'll be ready in two seconds.

**Heç iki-üç dəqiqə deyil, çatmışam.**  
Literally: It is not two-three minutes that I arrived.  
Meaning: It hasn't yet been two or three minutes since I arrived.

The number "two" when used with the word "gün" (day), indicates rapid progress, but usually in the negative sense.

**İki gün deyil gəlib, gör indidən nələ tələb edir.**  
It's not two days since he has come, see what he's already asking for.

## LOW EXPECTATIONS

The numbers "one" and "two" are used in the expression "iki cüt bir tək" (two pairs and one) to indicate a smaller quantity than expected.

**O cür mühüm görüşə iki cüt bir tək adam gəlmədi.**  
Literally: Only two couples and one person came to that important meeting.  
Meaning: Very few people came to such an important meeting.

**Onda heç bir qram ağıl deyilən şey yoxdur.**  
He doesn't even have a one-gram brain. Meaning: He's not smart and doesn't even know simple things.

**Bir addım irəli gedir, iki addım dala.**  
He takes one step forward and two steps back.

This expression describes a person who doesn't make any progress; failure is more obvious than success.

## EXAGGERATION

When used with words indicating a large quantity or length, numbers "two", "three" and "five" are used to express exaggeration. For example, number "two" is mostly used with the word "metr".

**İki metr boyu var, amma ağı yoxdur.**  
Literally: He has two meters' height, but no brains.

He is two meters tall, but he doesn't have a brain. This expression is used to refer to a very tall person who isn't very clever, or who says or does stupid things.

**İki metr boyu var, danışdığı sözə bax.**  
He is two meters tall, but look at what he is saying.

**Mənə iki metr dil çıxardır.**  
Literally: He shows me a two-meter tongue.  
Meaning: He keeps arguing with me and he's getting on my nerves.

## EXAGGERATION OF TIME

The numbers "two" and "three", but rarely "five", are used to indicate exaggeration of time. The number "two" is also used together with the word "gün" (day) or "günü" (afternoon) to indicate frequency.

**İki gündən bir bızdadırlar.**  
They are at our place once in two days.  
This expression has a negative connotation and is used when such frequency is not desirable.

"A long time" is also expressed with "two" and "year" (iki il).

**İki ildir gözle-gözle, axırda nəticəyə bax!**  
I've been waiting for two years, and look at the end result.

A person complaining that he hasn't seen someone for a long time often exaggerates the situation by using the number "100".

**Bir əsirdir onu görmürəm.**  
Literally: It's a century I haven't seen him.  
Meaning: It's been a century since I've seen him.

**Yüz ildir onu görmürəm.**  
It's one hundred years I haven't seen him.

**40 dəfə demişəm, bu da olsun 41-ci.**

I've said this 40 times before, let this be the 41st [time].  
Meaning: I keep saying the same thing over and over to you. My answer hasn't changed. It's the same.

**100 dəfə demişəm ehtiyatlı olun.**  
I've warned you 100 times to be careful.

## UNCERTAINTY

Azerbaijanis usually preface future plans with the expression: "Allah qoysa" (If God permits) or "İnşaa" (If God is willing).

**Allah qoysa, sabah gəlib səni görəram.**  
If God permits, tomorrow I'll come to see you.

## CERTAINTY

Certainty of time is often expressed in percentages by using the term "100 faiz" (100 percent).

**100 faiz biliram ki, gəlməyəcək.**  
I know 100 percent that he will not come.

Absolute certainty is expressed with the term, "200 faiz" ("200 percent").

**200 faiz biliram ki, gəlməyəcək.**  
I know 200 percent that he will not come.

**100 faiz yox, 200 faiz biliram ki, gəlməyəcək.**  
I know 200 percent, not 100 percent, that he will not come.

## FOOD AND QUANTITY

Azerbaijanis are sensitive to expressing the need of much food, especially at the table; therefore they would not say: "pour much water in here".

If not much quantity is desired, the phrase "bir az" (one little) is used.

**Sudan bir az bura tök.**  
Pour a little water here.

If just a small quantity of liquid is desired, the expression "bir damcı" or "bir gicə" is used. Both mean "one drop".

**Sudan bir damcı bura tök.**  
Pour a drop of water (in) here.

If the item is not in liquid form, other expressions are used: such as "bir qaşığı" (one spoon), "bir qırıq" (one piece) or "bir tükə" (one bite).

**Salatdan bir qaşığı bura qoy.**  
Put one spoon of salad here.

Azerbaijanis are known for their warm hospitality and generosity. However, at the dinner table, it's rare for them to verbalize about large quantities of food even though the table may be laden down with dishes. Therefore when hosts are trying to encourage guests to take more food, they rarely indicate words of quantity such as: "much", "a lot", "plenty". They wouldn't want to embarrass their guests.

The host will not say:  
**Xörəkdən çox götür.**  
Take a lot of the meal.

Rather, the host will quantify the amount by saying:

**Xörəkdən aməlli-başlı götür.**  
Literally: Take of the meal with deed and head.  
Meaning: Take more than you've already taken.

## QUANTITY WITHOUT NUMBERS

There are also certain set expressions, used in informal speech, to indicate various aspects of quantity.

**Səsi quyunun dibindən gəlir.**  
His voice is heard from the bottom of the ditch.  
Meaning: His voice is too low.

**Allaha pay aparır.**  
He takes a gift to God.  
Meaning: This person is very tall.

**Ayaq üstə canı çıxıb.**  
He's dead on his feet.  
Meaning: He's too thin.

**Bir dəridir, bir sümük.**  
He's one skin, one bone.  
Meaning: He's skin and bones. He's very thin.  
**Yansı yerin altı ilə gedir, yansı üstü ilə.**  
Half of him goes underground, and half on the ground.  
Meaning: He's a short person who is very smart or cunning.

**Yerin altını da bilir, üstünü də.**

He knows both the depth and the surface of the earth.  
Meaning: He's very smart and clever.

**Burnunu tutsan, canı çıxar.**  
If you squeeze his nose, he'll die.  
Meaning, he's too thin or weak.

**Dərisinə sığmır.**  
He doesn't fit into his skin.  
Meaning: He's too fat.

**Ağıl dəryasıdır.**  
He is a sea of mind.  
Meaning: He's very clever.

**Oxumamış alimdir.**  
He's a scientist without studying.

**Yolu ağartmaq.**  
Literally: to tread a road so much that it turns white.  
Meaning: to go back and forth frequently.

**Son vaxtlar Moskvanın yolunu ağartmışan.**  
Literally: Recently, your road to Moscow is turning white.  
Meaning: Recently, you've been going back and forth to Moscow so much that you've polished the road with all your traveling.

**Başımı qaşmağa vaxtım yoxdur.**  
I don't have time to scratch my head.

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*AZERI.org also features more than 50 contemporary Azerbaijani writers in Azeri (Latin script) and English translation. Azerbaijan International's staff Aynura Huseinova, Ulviyya Mammadova, Aytan Aliyeva and Aydan Najafova also contributed to this article. ■*