Sociolinguistics, Unit 3: Multilingualism and Diglossia

Diglossia

Diglossia is the term used to describe a situation in which:

a) two speech varieties are used within a single speech community, and

b) each speech variety is used in specific 'domains', with little overlap between domains in which the two speech varieties are used.

Domains

The key term in the above definition is **domain**. A domain is defined as a combination of specific times, settings and role relationships, for example:

- Family domain: chatting at home with family members
- Friends domain: chatting about non-work issues with colleagues; meeting friends at a social gathering
- Religious domain: preaching or praying in a place of worship; conducting religious ceremonies such as weddings and funerals
- Employment domain: talking about work-related issues with colleagues in the usual work location (office, factory, farm, etc.)
- Education domain: giving a lecture at university; teaching a class at elementary/primary school
- etc. (there is no fixed list of domains)

In a diglossic situation, one speech variety is used in domains such as education, employment, formal religion (preaching, liturgy), public speeches and television news broadcasts. This is known as the **H variety** or just **H** (where H stands for High). The other speech variety is used in domains such as family, friends, informal religion (prayer) and entertaining television broadcasts such as soap operas. This is known as the **L variety** or just **L** (where L stands for Low).

Different kinds of diglossia

Diglossia is a characteristic of speech communities rather than of individuals (that is, a speech community can be diglossic, a person can't). The term *diglossia* was adapted from French *diglossie* by the American linguist Charles Ferguson (1959) to describe societies in which a classical form of a language is used for certain domains whilst a modern colloquial version of the language is used for more informal communication. This is now known as **classical diglossia**; an example is the use of classical Arabic and local varieties of colloquial Arabic in most of the Middle East and North Africa.

Another kind of diglossia is **creole diglossia**. In creole diglossia, H is a language which originates in a different speech community, and L is a creole based on H (that is, H is the superstrate or lexifier language). An example is Nigeria, where English is H and Nigerian Pidgin is L. Creoles are discussed in Unit 5 on language contact.

A third kind of diglossia is **border diglossia**. In border diglossia, H originates in a neighbouring community and L is a local variety. An example is Switzerland, where High German (spoken in Germany) is H and Swiss German is L.

The following table (adapted from Ferguson 1959: 329, cited in Mesthrie et al. 2009: 39) gives a typical distribution of speech varieties in classical diglossia:

	H	L
Sermon in church or mosque	X	
Instruction to servants, waiters, workmen, clerks		X
Personal letter		X
Speech in parliament, political speech	X	
University lecture	X	
Conversation with family, friends, colleagues		X
News broadcast	X	
Radio 'soap opera'		X
Poetry	X	
Folk literature		X

Ferguson's definition of classical diglossia was extended by Joshua Fishman (1967). Fishman's modifications can be summarized as follows:
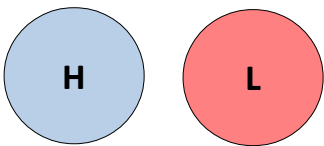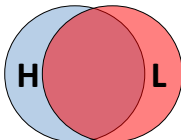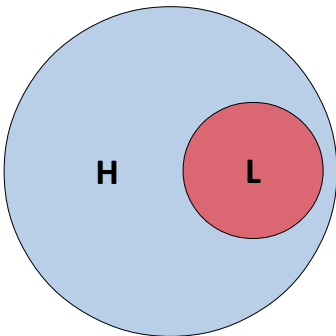
1. Diglossia need not necessarily involve only two varieties. There can be 'triglossia' (three languages) etc.

2. The definition of H and L was extended from varieties of the same language to "functionally differentiated language varieties of whatever kind." This means that different dialects of a single language can function as H and L in a speech community.

3. The degree of individual bilingualism can vary independently of diglossia.

The third modification may need some explanation. We are all familiar with the idea that individuals can be bilingual (speak two languages) or multilingual (speak many languages). In fact, everyone taking this course is bilingual or multilingual. This is known as **individual bilingualism**. When two languages are spoken by most members of a speech community (typically by all or almost all of the adults in that community) then the community as a whole can be described as bilingual. This is known as **societal bilingualism**. However, societal bilingualism can also occur in situations where a society consists of two distinct groups of people (two speech communities), each with their own speech variety, where few individuals are bilingual in both varieties. Fishman's third modification of Ferguson's definition means that a society can be diglossic, even when some (or even most) people in that society are not bilingual.

Diglossia and societal bilingualism

Different kinds of diglossic societies can be distinguished based on different kinds of societal bilingualism. It is possible to have a bilingual (or multilingual) society without diglossia; examples include countries with more than one official or national language such as Canada (English and French) and Belgium (Flemish and French) where few individuals are bilingual.

The chart below describes the three main ways in which diglossia and societal bilingualism can interact.

	Type of diglossia/bilingualism	Examples
H L	Diglossia with low levels of individual bilingualism: Two separate speech communities co-existing within a single country/region.	Pre-Revolutionary (Tzarist) Russia: H = French, L = Russian. Colonial situations: H = colonial language, L = local language.
H L	Diglossia plus widespread individual bilingualism: A single speech community in which many (adult) speakers are (at least partially) bilingual.	German-speaking Switzerland: H = High German, L = Swiss German. Egypt: H = standard Arabic, L = colloquial Egyptian Arabic. Kenya: H = English, L = various local languages
H L	Diglossia with individual bilingualism among certain speakers. Two separate speech communities co-existing within a single country/region, where most of the members of one speech community speak only H and (some of) the members of the other speech community speak both H and L (and may thus be simultaneously part of both speech communities).	The monolingual group is usually politically and socially dominant, and the bilingual group is usually politically and socially disadvantaged. Examples include minority immigrant communities in countries such as the UK and France, whose speakers use their mother tongue in typical L domains and use English or French in H domains and when interacting with monolingual speakers of the H variety.

Leaky Diglossia

So long as the H and L varieties continue to be used in specific domains with little overlap, a diglossic situation can continue for many generations; this is known as stable diglossia. However, when speakers start to use one variety in domains where the other variety had previously been used, this can indicate the end of stable diglossia. This kind of situation, in which one variety "leaks" into the domains previously reserved for the other variety, is known as **leaky diglossia** (Fishman 1972: 105).

In Tanzania, there is triglossia with English, Swahili and local languages. English is always H and the local languages are always L, but Swahili is sometimes H and sometimes L. For example, on a university campus in Tanzania English is the language of lectures, readings and exams (H), and Swahili is the language of social interaction (L). In a rural village, on the other hand, Swahili is the language of public meetings, news broadcasts, and primary education (H), and the local language is the language of social interaction (L).

However, in many speech communities Swahili is "leaking" into domains where previously the local language would have been used. This is partly due to increased mobility resulting in speakers of different local languages coming into more frequent contact with each other. The result is that speakers of some local languages are *shifting* to Swahili. (Language shift is discussed in Unit 6.)

In addition, for many years Swahili has also been "leaking" into domains where previously English would have been used, largely due to government policy in favour of Swahili. The result is that Swahili now has an increasing number of loan words from English, and there is frequent code-mixing. (Loan words are discussed in Unit 5, and code-mixing is discussed in Unit 3.) A detailed account of the Tanzanian situation soon after independence can be found in Abdulaziz Mkilifi (1972).

Further Reading

A very detailed discussion of diglossia can be found in Fasold (1984) chapter 2, but diglossia is explained in all Sociolinguistic textbooks.

Discussion Forum

Look at the following descriptions of the H and L varieties in a diglossic situation. Use the Diglossia discussion forum to discuss *at least three* of the following questions:

- H is prestigious; L has low status (or may even be stigmatized). *What problems might this cause when using a questionnaire or survey to study diglossia in a speech community?*

- H is usually learned (at school/church/mosque); L is usually acquired as a mother tongue. *Do you feel differently about varieties you have learned and varieties you acquired as a mother tongue?*

- Hi is standardized and often associated with literature; L is not standardized and often has no written form. *What effects do you think these facts are likely to have on H and L?*

- L often borrows lexical items from H, but H doesn't usually borrow lexical items from L. *Why is this?*

- H often has lexical 'gaps' where L has a word. *Why is this?*

References

Abdulaziz Mkilifi, M. H. (1972). Triglossia and Swahili-English bilingualism in Tanzania. *Language in Society* 1: 197–213.

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