HAS THE CONCEPT OF "DIGLOSSIA" BEEN REFINED SO MUCH THAT A USEFUL DISTINTION BETWEEN DIGLOSSIC AND NON-DIGLOSSIC SOCIETIES HAS BEEN LOST?

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Since it was first introduced the term diglossia has come to be applied to various kinds of speech community, many having little in common with each other apart from the co-existence of mor than one language. Such a description is one far removed from the original, and it is surely the case that using the term to describe such communities has led to more confusion than clarification, so that today the distinction between diglossic and non-diglossic societies has virtually been lost.

What follows here is a discussion of diglossia, how the term was first introduced, what it originally referred to, and how as a tool of analysis the term has been extended and used to suit a variety of needs. One consequence of this has been the gradual obscuring of its original meaning and hence its potential to distinguish diglossic communities (in the original sense of the word) from non-diglossic communities. With this in mind the discussion closes with a suggestion for the introduction of a new term to distinguish certain types of linguistic community from truly diglossic ones in order to preserve the distinctiveness of the original meaning.

The term diglossia was first introduced in an area of sociolinguistics concerned with studying the co-existence of different varieties or types of the same language within a speech community. Of particular interest to researchers was that usage of the two varieties or types was dictated by the nature of the social situation or circumstances within which communication took place. Ome of the most common examples of this phenomena is where both standard language and regional dialect co-exist, but are used differentially according to the nature and type of linguistic function which the speaker wishes to realise. Thus for example, in parts of Northern Italy many people will speak the local dialect at home with family and friends of the same area, but will use the standard language when communicating with speakers of other dialects, as for example on public occasions.

Diglossia describes a situation in which two very different varieties of a language co-occur through a speech community, each with a distinct range of social function. Both varieties are standardised to some degree, are felt to be alternatives by native speakers, and usually have special names. In describing the phenomenon, Ferguson talked in terms of a high (H) variety and a low (L) variety. The employment of the two forms corresponds broadly to differences in formality; that is, H and L are functionally differentiated. The high variety is learnt at school, tends to be used in church, on radio programmes, in serious literature, etc., and as a consequence has greater social prestige; the low variety tends to be used in family conversations and other relatively informal settings. Communities exhibiting these characteristics Ferguson described as diglossic, giving the following examples: Greece, the Arab speaking world in general, German speaking Switzerland, and the Island of Haiti.

Previously such communities had been described as bilingual, and in some cases still are. However Ferguson observed that diglossic communities are distinguished from others by certain characteristics. To define them, ten key features were outlined. In order to facilitate a clearer analysis Winford (1985: 347) classifies these features into two categories of (a) linguistic and (b) sociocultural features, and it is these I shall now consider.

Of the linguistic features specified by Ferguson,

(a) The genetic relationship between the two forms is considered fundamental, i.e. in a diglossic society the varieties involved belong to the same language. Moreover, this relationship must not only be scientifically demonstrable, but must be perceived by the community themselves.

(b) The linguistic situation must be stable. Studies of the above mentined communities led Ferguson to claim that diglossia typically persisted for at least several centuries and mor, being most resistant to change.

(c) The vocabulary, or at least most of it is shared between the H and L forms, although variations in form and meaning may be observed.

(d) The grammar structure: Ferguson observed that the most striking difference between H and L was in grammar structure, where that of H was much mor complex than L, having more grammatical categories, more complex morphophonemics and more complex structures Trudgill (1974: 120) illustrates this showing how in the H form of Arabic, there are 3 cases in the noun form marked by different endings, none of which occur in the L form.

(e) Discussing the phonology Ferguson found it problematic to make a general statement about the relation between the phonology of both the H and L forms, as

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they were found to be either quite close e.g. H and L Greek or strikingly divergent e.g. Swiss - German. However he concluded that:

"The sound systems of the H and L constitute a single phonological structure of which the L phonology is the basic system, and of which divergent features of H phonology are either a subsystem or parasystem." (op cit: p. 335)

Many of the phonological features were found to correspond, e.g. in Arabic

H   L

(q) corresponds to (ʔ)

(θ)   "   (t)

(š)   "   (d)

Trudgill (1974:120)

Five further features were defined, as classified separately by Winford as sociocultural features;

(a) Specialization of functions, where the functions of the H and L form are in complementary distribution. Ferguson cites several examples e.g. a university lecture would be given in the H form, and folk literature in L. Poetry would be written in H and a personal letter in L. Radio "soap operas" in L and classical drama in H.

(b) Prestige. H is regarded as superior to L in a number of ways, w.g. more beautiful, more logical, better able to express logical thoughts than the L form. It was also observed that some speakers may even deny they habe knowledge of L, that they use it, or even its very existence.

(c) Literaty heritage. Thus a sizeable body of written literature exists in the H which the community holds in high esteem.

(d) Standardization. The H form is codified, the L form isn't.

(e) With regard to acquisition, Ferguson noted that the L form is the first language of all speakers . The H form is not native to anyone and has to be acquired through formal education.

When considering these sociocultural factors it is important to note that they do not represent absolute definitions of use. Thus as Trudgill (op cit: 118) points out, that while most Greeks would write a letter in the L form, most Swiss Germans would use the H form. However such observations are not considered to prejudice the importance or relevance of the description, since distinct functions of H and L are still maintained in other areas of social life.

The suggestion that diglossia include bilingualism is arguably one of the major factors responsible for the refinement/devaluation of the term which has led to a

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change in, or even loss of its original meaning. It is sometimes mede on the grounds that the functions of different languages are in complementary distribution, e.g. in Nigeria where Yoruba and English are both spoken by the majority of the population. Although there are no genetic or structural relations between the two, it is a situation referred to by the population asdiglossic, since several of the sociocultural features of Ferguson's diglossia are present. English is considered to be the prestige variety, being the language of religion, education, administration, commerce and "high culture. Yoruba is the indigenous L form which is acquired first and used in informal situations and "low" culture, e.g. folk literature and drama, and letter writing. As Fishman points out (1968: 50.N.16) such examples would explain how the term has come to be extended to include practically any society in which there is a societally based and culturally valued functional differentiation. A logical though extreme extension of this view is that almost every case of multilingualism (in the case of one speaker having knowledge of the two languages) could fit the description of diglossia.

The fact that some of the sociocultural features are characteristic of many types of linguistic situations is one reason why the term diglossia has been applied to various types of linguistic community other than the specific one originally described by Ferguson. But it is important to distinguish between (a) diglossia which implies a societally based and culturally valued functional differentiation between languages and (b) bilingualism, which carries no such implication but is often confused with diglossia. The problem is that as the functions of any two languages controlled by a single speaker are almost always in partial or total complementary distribution, the concept of diglossia is rendered virtually meaningless when used to describe such situations.

Following research by Joshua Fishman into the sociolinguistic situation in Paraguay, the significance of the term was further extended to describe the linguistic community there, (1971:75) even though the two languages in question (Spanish and Guarani) had no type of genetic relation with one another. However as both languages were observed to be functionally differentiated with Spanish as the H form, and where almost the entire population learnt Guarani before Spanish (the latter being learnt formally at school) Fishman considered that sufficient criteria were fulfilled for the situation to be described as diglossic. While on one hand this may seem quite an imprecise or unsatisfactory use of the term, it may be said in defence of Fishman that, in a sociolinguistic sense at least, no real distinction exists between varieties of one language and other, different languages. Such a view can be justified on the grounds that form the purposes of social research into linguistic matters the object of interest is the linguistic item and how it is employed by

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members of the speech community. Thus if we take Hudson's definition of a variety of languages as "a set of, linguistic items with similar social distribution" (1980: 24) we are left with a concepto of a language which permits us to validly describe such communities as Paraguay as diglossic, ignoring the linguistic features which Ferguson originally specified (e.g. the genetic relationship) instead concentrating on the sociocultural features (e.g. functional differentiation) which the languages have in common.

However such an argument cannot be offered in defence of subsequent research by Fishman. Attempting to impose a Framework which would define any speech community in terms of either bilingualism or diglossia, he posited 4 sets of possible relationships between them, in which bilingualism was defined as the result of the use of more than one code by the individual, and diglossia the result of the valuation of the functional differentiation (1971: 74). These were described as bilingualism together with diglossia, diglossia without bilingualism, bilingualism without diglossia, and neither diglossia nor bilingualism. The problem is that as no speek communities were identified as belonging to the last category (Fishman believed it to be "self-liquidating" (1971: 75) then potentially all societies could be described as diglossic or bilingual in some sense, even English speaking England, (excluding immigrants and speakers with other languages as their mother tongue) where different registers and dialects may be used in different situations. For exemple in a sports report the register or style is quite different to that used in a religious sermon. Presumably there would be no justification for describing such a situation as diglossic, since the most obvious difference between diglossia and the situation of standard language, with social/regional dialects is that segments of the population learn the H variety as their first language. This in turn leads to stylistic differences emerging between social classes, even in everyday conversation. Therefore since H and L are not in complementary distribution, the situation cannot be truly described as diglossic.

Following studies carried out in Singapore and Malaysia and an appreciation of the linguistic situation there, Platt (1977) sought to further redefine the meaning of the term diglossia. Observing multilingual communities with mixed ethnic groupings, and how these were characterized by a correlation between the codes used by individuals, their particular spheres of social activity (e.g. employment and religion) and particular social attitudes and values held by the speakers, he advocated the use of the term "polyglossia with multilingualism" (1977: 362). This led him to argue not only for functional differentiation but also for social differentiation, using the term polyglossia to describe codes correlated with this.

While such a description may represent a logical extension of Fishman's "socially based and culturally valued differentiation", Winford (op. cit:348) criticises

the concept on three counts: that (a) the lack of clear cut evaluation of H and L i.e. prestige and non-prestige in such cases; (b) the multiplicity of codes, which is not compatible with Ferguson's specification that they must be of the same language. And finally (c) that the demarcation of different functions is not clear. In the light of the discussion so far, the previously mentioned point that research in sociolinguistics is concerned with the distribution of linguistic items, not varieties of language, reduces the significance of point (b). But the validity of points A and C render Platt's attempts at redefinition at best open to question, at worst totally inadequate.

Before continuing it will be useful to review the discussion so far. As we have seen, the concept of diglossia has been related in different ways to different types of speech community, whether monolingual, bilingual, multilingual etc. For Ferguson the concept depended on the nature of (a) the linguistic relationships between the two forms and (b) the social and functional differentiation which characterized the usage of the two forms (H and L). However more recent approaches have sought to extend the meaning of the term, using it to describe any society in which two or more varieties are used under different circumstances. As such the term has been employed as a tool of analysis and classification enabling researchers to observe that linguistically different societies may have much in common as far as the social organization of language is concerned, e.g. Haiti, Paraguay, and the Phillipines.

I would argue that it is because diglossia has been extensively used in this way i.w. as a tool of empirical investigation, that, as the little suggests, it may appear that the distinction between diglossic and non-diglossic societies has indeed been lost. But this should not overshadow the fact that diglossia in its own right, as Ferguson defined it, is a precise term for a distinct type of community which is neither monolingual nor bilingual, and which is set apart from other types owing to (a) its particular linguistic composition, and (b) the way it is functionally differentiated.

Of central importance is the question of language and language varieties since as Hudson (1980: 55) comments, how we view "varieties" depends on how we view diglossia. If we say that varieties of language don't exist except as collections of items with similar social distributions, then a diglossic society is one in which the linguistic items belong to one of two overlapping sets, each used in different circumstances as in Ferguson's defivitive cases of the Arab speaking world, Haiti, Greece and Swiss-Germany. On the other hand if we acknowledge the existence of varieties as distinct and separate systems with their own unique social distribution and which do not fall into a number of overlapping set, then the situation can be said to be non-diglossic, e.g. Nigeria or Paraguay.

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It is for this reason that the term diglossia has been used so variously and imprecisely and it is to this point which I shall now turn. While such a dichotomy may be useful for certain types of research purposes, in the field of language planning and policy making it represents a wholly inadequate approach which fails to acknowledge the existence of other fundamental differences. An example will illustrate my point: Earlier I discussed the linguistic situation in Nigeria where English is considered the H form and Yoruba is the indigenous low form and the first language of almost the entire population. If we take the viewpoint which says that although functional differentiation exists, English and Yoruba constitute sets of linguistic items, then such a society is necessarily described as non diglossic. But then so are may other communities, e.g. Britain, yet as has been shown there are many other sociocultural factors which distinguish the linguistic situation of Nigeria from that of Britain, and which are potentially the cause of many social problems in such fields as literacy, educational achievement and mass communication.

Given this situation, it can be claimed with some conviction that for the purposes of policy making and planning in these areas, there exists a real need for a way to precisely label such types of community in which different language systems co-exist, and that while not diglossic in the classic "Fergusonian" sense, have certain sociocultural features in common. To describe such situations or communities, the term quasi-diglossic could be introduced, which while still somewhat imprecise, has two advantages: (a) It preserves the distinctiveness of "disglossia" and the diglossic society as originally defined by Ferguson, and (b) It indicates that there are certain features which both speech communities share.

Such a description differs from previous attempts at classification or definition which have either failed to identify the distinctiveness of certain linguistic communities or else have subsumed the distinctiveness of the classic meaning in an attempt to construct a dichotomous framework. It could also provide an adequate means of description for interested groups such as sociolinguists and language planners, since it identifies the distinctiveness of communities where important features such as functional differentiation occur, and thus help end the present confusion surrounding the present use and meaning of the term.

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