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DIGLOSSIA: A CRITICAL OVERVIEW OF THE SWISS EXAMPLE

Keywords: diglossia, Switzerland, bilingualism, language functions, Ferguson

Abstract

The article addresses the issue of diglossia in its original and extended definition. The main point of discussion is the validity of the ‘defining cases’ of diglossia selected by Ferguson (1959) to substantiate his concept. The four well-known pairs of languages described by Ferguson in his seminal article include the ‘Swiss pair’ of Standard German and Swiss German and their functional distribution. Following a number of critical opinions, I will show that the consistency between the definition and its Swiss illustration raises a few questions and cannot be considered tenable. Lastly, I will highlight the main differences between diglossia and bilingualism as two phenomena which in certain contexts may overlap.

1. Introduction

Languages and their varieties exist in complex interrelations in which they are assigned different tasks. The combination of the forms and functions of distinct codes came to be known as a specific type of bilingualism or *diglossia*. The term is inseparably linked with Charles Ferguson and his article of 1959, in which diglossia was officially introduced into sociolinguistic literature. Since Ferguson was the first to describe this phenomenon, his definition is considered to be the classic version, especially in view of the later modifications to the concept proposed by Joshua Fishman (1967). The diglossic view of bilingualism builds on domains which are vital in the macro-analysis of functional distribution within multilingual or multidialectal speech communities (Fishman 1972: 44). Such societies recognise two or more languages in intra-societal communication. Also, diglossia

is considered to reinforce social distinctions. Romaine (1994: 47) describes the procedure of ascribing languages to domains as “compartmentalization of varieties”, which understandably restricts access to some of the domains due to the mismatch of a given variety with a particular context (also cf. Fasold 1984, Martinet 1986: 245).

Diglossia is one of the key concepts in the study of societal multilingualism. It belongs to the macro-level of sociolinguistics since it is a phenomenon relating more to a group rather than an individual. The attempts at a revision of the original concept, and the multitude of interpretations, prove the intense interest it aroused in scholars. Apart from that, another reason for introducing this issue in this article is the diglossic relationship between Standard German and Swiss German in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. Diglossia in Switzerland was used as one of the four examples cited by Ferguson in his seminal article. Interestingly, the Swiss context never entirely matched Ferguson’s definition, and the dissonance concerns one of the most important criteria established by Ferguson, i.e. prestige. This, in turn, proves perhaps not so much a flawed theorising concerning diglossia, but rather signals the uniqueness of every single multilingual context.

2. Diglossia according to Ferguson

Ferguson chose the term *diglossia* to describe a special type of bilingualism in which two co-existing linguistic codes of different status compete with one another. Speakers can use several language varieties, basing their decision on the circumstances. However, diglossia does not apply in the case of alternate usage of a standard language and its variety, but in cases where “two distinct [...] languages are used [...] throughout a speech community each with a clearly defined role” (Ferguson 1959/1972: 233). A standard language fulfils the so-called ‘high’ functions that are appropriate for formal contexts, while the ‘low’ functions are ascribed to dialectal forms employed in the privacy of one’s home (Ferguson 1959/1972: 246). Hence, we speak about High (H) and Low (L) varieties. To characterise the H and L varieties does not pose a problem, suffice it to say that “H and L have disjoint functions: where H is appropriate, L is inappropriate and vice versa” (Sebba 2011: 450). Thus, the differences concern the codes themselves, for example, their syntax, phonology, lexicon, which are merely a reflection of the social characteristics, such as their function, status, acquisition and the degree of standardisation. L is typically used in familial interactions, whereas H is acquired later at school. It should be stressed that people who live in a diglossic community do not usually consider their lives to be as complicated by diglossia as those living outside such a community. The problem may be revealed by the desire to decrease regional barriers, or when the question of one ‘unifying’ national language is raised.

Ferguson set out to expound the concept of diglossia by establishing nine categories which are prioritised according to function, prestige, literary heritage,

acquisition, standardisation, stability, grammar, lexicon, and phonology. The functional linguistic distribution, or the specialisation of function, is the 'existential' feature of diglossia. The original concept provides for two distinct varieties of the same language, the High and the Low. Accordingly, there are contexts where only one of the varieties can be used, with a small margin of overlap, since "the importance of using the right variety in the right situation can hardly be overestimated" (Ferguson 1959/1972: 236). The second most important feature of diglossia is prestige, which depends on the attitude of the speakers in diglossic communities. Typically the H variety enjoys superiority over the L variety, as the latter is believed to be inferior in a number of respects. Ferguson (1959/1972: 237) explains that "even where the feeling of the reality and superiority of H is not so strong, there is usually a belief that H is somehow more beautiful, more logical, better able to express important thoughts, and the like". However, rarely is the category of prestige as uncomplicated in life as it is in theory, which is to be demonstrated later in this section. As for literary heritage, it is mostly the preserve of the H variety. In the category of acquisition, the method of acquisition counts most, i.e. the L variety is learned naturally at home whereas the H variety is taught via schooling. Standardisation is obviously the domain of the H variety, which has established norms for orthography, grammar and pronunciation. The next category describes diglossia as a highly stable phenomenon that can last several hundreds of years. As far as grammar, vocabulary and phonology are concerned, a wide variation in all these aspects can be noted. Typically some grammatical categories in H are reduced or not present in the L variety. Also, much of the vocabulary of the two varieties is shared, but with differences in meaning and with the existence of many paired items.

Before we come to Ferguson's complete definition of diglossia, it is important to note that H and L are not separate languages, but varieties of the same language. Yet, H and L cannot linguistically be too similar, with differences not just in style or register. Lastly, but equally importantly, the diglossia is different from the co-existence of standard and varieties in that the diglossic community never uses H in ordinary conversations. Such attempts would be ridiculed as pedantic and artificial or even, in a sense, disloyal to the community. Mindful of the above as regards the nine features of diglossia, Ferguson (1959/1972: 245) gave a complete and often-quoted definition of diglossia:

DIGLOSSIA is a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation.

Ferguson not only specifies the essence of diglossia, but he also gives reasons for the existence of the phenomenon, which is worth citing here. Accordingly (Ferguson 1959/1972: 247),

[...] diglossia is likely to come into being when the following three conditions hold in a given speech community: (1) There is a sizable body of literature in a language closely related to (or even identical with) the natural language of the community. [...] (2) Literacy in the community is limited to a small elite. (3) A suitable period of time, of the order of several centuries, passes from the establishment of (1) and (2).

3. Swiss German: Low variety with prestige

Thanks to Ferguson (1959/1972), it is not only the concept of diglossia that has become well-known in sociolinguistic circles, but also the four languages he selected to be the “defining cases” of diglossia, including the pair, High German and Swiss German.¹ Martinet (1986: 248) argues that Alemannic Switzerland is an illustration of an enduring diglossia. Indeed, for centuries the Swiss have managed to keep an equilibrium between their dialectal varieties and Standard German so that now it can be concluded that fusion has been permanently averted. The reason for this has not been single inertia. On the contrary, it has been the historical relationship between the H and L varieties as well as the contexts of their usage and the extent to which L is cherished. In other words, diglossia has proved useful to the German-speaking Swiss for several practical yet at the same time elevated reasons. The Swiss diglossia has counterbalanced the pressure exerted by the neighbouring powerful German-speaking states. The Alemannic language has always had political significance, because it is the most obvious distinguishing feature between the countries to the north and south of the Rhine. The allegiance to Swiss German as a solidarity marker helped preserve the independence of the Confederation. This distinguishing feature, the vernacular, was particularly important during the years of Nazi government in the Third Reich. It was at that time that Swiss Germans sought refuge within their own language. It was also at that time that Swiss German entered many spheres of public life, never to lose its position. Today, Swiss Germans assert their independence from Germans in the same way – through their own distinctive spoken L variety in which they take pride. Another factor that stabilises diglossia within Switzerland is the strong constitutional protection for all official languages. Standard German is taught at schools and used in the media, literature and most official situations, thereby providing Swiss Germans with access to the outside world through Standard German, written or spoken. Lastly, it may be said that Swiss German is an instrument of practical democracy. Due to its common use, it does not divide society into classes as in many other countries, but it is an audible token of equality among the people.

It must be stressed that Swiss German has no single standard, and is an umbrella term for several Alemannic dialects² that developed around the largest Swiss cities.

¹ Rash (1998) writes in detail about the Swiss German dialects, their geographical distribution and distinctive yet common features.

² In 1938 Eugen Dieth, a Swiss linguist and phonetician, put forward a proposal to codify the orthography of the Alemannic dialects in a brochure *Schwyzertütsch Dialäktschrift* in which

Thus, the Swiss population in German Switzerland may be regarded as bilingual, i.e. native speakers of a given Swiss German dialect, who restrict their usage of Standard German to written, formal and technical contexts (Weinreich 1953/1968: 89). Fasold (1984: 41) claims that each German-speaking Swiss canton may be regarded as a bilingual-diglossic speech community, where people use Swiss German and Standard German in a typically diglossic manner. In order to highlight the difference between the Alemannic dialect and Standard German, the former was referred to as *Eidgenössisch / Helvetisch Landsprach, Schwyzerisch, der Helvetier Tütsch*, and also since 1750 as *Schweizerdeutsch* or *Schwyzertütsch*.

The linguistic features of Swiss German varieties, manifesting in their apparent dialectal roots as well as the resulting grammatical and lexical dissimilarities when compared with High German, lead to a complete incomprehension of Swiss German dialects by the overwhelming majority of native speakers of Standard German. Szulc (1999: 113) quotes Kuno Raeber³ as saying that:

Ein Dialekt, der von allen Volksschichten bei allen Gelegenheiten gesprochen wird und allmählich zum selbstverständlichen Mittel der öffentlichen Kommunikation geworden ist, ein solcher Dialekt ist kein Dialekt mehr.

[A dialect which is used by all the social strata but which has become in itself an intelligible means of social communication, such a dialect, is not a dialect any more.]

According to Szulc (1999: 143), from the linguistic viewpoint, the Swiss standard variety of German should be regarded as a *secondary language*. The German-speaking Swiss acquire it like a *primary language*, i.e. in direct contact with a non-linguistic reality, but do so only after they have learnt to speak the Alemannic dialect. Spoken Standard German is used mainly for communication with Germans, Swiss compatriots who cannot speak the Alemannic dialects, and foreigners who speak German. The German-speaking Swiss learn to speak Standard German in the third grade of primary school, when it is the primary medium of communication. They hear it also in church, on the radio and on television. Taking into account the above, and especially the significance of the written language, we can assume that the ethnically Alemannic Swiss are distinguished by a special type of bilingualism – a symbiosis of two admittedly similar yet syntactically different languages.

4. Fishman's elaborations on diglossia

Ferguson described diglossic situations which are now referred to as 'classic' or 'narrow'. This particularisation is needed, especially in view of the subsequent comments

he consistently tried to introduce, where possible, a correspondence between spelling and phonetic transcription.

³ Szulc (1999) refers to the words of the poet, Kuno Raeber, from the literary supplement *Luzerner Neueste Nachrichten* of 20 December 1982. I quote after Szulc.

on his article about diglossia (1959). Here Fishman's (1967) response, or rather his attempt to redefine the term introduced by Ferguson, merits special attention. In fact, Fishman's contribution may be perceived as a continuation of, and at the same time complementary to, Ferguson's definition of diglossia. In 1967 Fishman presented his extended definition of diglossia which differed from Ferguson's original concept in two crucial aspects, i.e. the number of languages and the degree of linguistic difference between them. Ferguson limited his view of diglossia to two language varieties, but Fishman allows for situations in which there are more than two languages. He (1967: 29) argues that "the use of several separate codes within a single society (and their stable maintenance rather than the displacement of one by the other over time) was found to be dependent on each code's serving functions distinct from those considered appropriate for the other". The other aspect is that diglossia is not only ascribed to multilingual societies, but also occurs in societies that use "separate dialects, registers, or *functionally differentiated, language varieties of whatever kind*" (Fishman 1972: 92, italics in the original). Thus, for Fishman both the subtle differences within one language and two separate languages qualify as diglossic situations as long as the linguistic differences have functional distinctions.⁴ Indeed, the functional distribution into H and L varieties is the most important point of convergence between the two linguists or, as Fasold (1984: 53) put it, "only function remains unchallenged; it is the very heart and soul of the diglossia concept".

Fasold (1984) noticed that Ferguson (1959/1972) explicitly excluded the functional distribution of unrelated languages or a standard language paired with its dialects, but that it is implicit in his definition that diglossia refers to contexts in which there are two moderately related language varieties. On the other hand, Fishman (1967) is unequivocal about the modified notion of diglossia which he broadened to encompass any degree of relatedness between languages, as well as their number, with regard to their functional distribution in society. Besides the article of 1967, elsewhere he also described diglossia as "an enduring societal arrangement, extending at least beyond a three generation period, such that two 'languages' each have their secure, phenomenologically legitimate and widely implanted functions" (Fishman 1980: 3), or as "the co-presence within an ethnolinguistic community of a widely implemented, generally accepted, and long-lasting complementary functional allocation of languages" (Fishman 1988: 4). Interestingly, after reviewing the concepts of diglossia proposed by Ferguson and Fishman, rather by way of conclusion and recapitulation, Fasold ventured to add the following definition:

BROAD DIGLOSSIA is the reservation of highly valued segments of a community's linguistic repertoire (which are not the first to be learned, but are learned later and more consciously, usually through formal education), for situations perceived as more formal and guarded; and the reservation of less highly valued segments (which are

⁴ Elaboration on Fishman's model led to the identification of further 'sub-types' of diglossia. For instance, Abdulaziz Mkilifi (1978) described 'triglossia' in Tanzania. Other examples are provided by Fasold (1984) who refers to the Tanzanian situation as "double-overlapping diglossia" and to the Chinese communities educated in English in Malaysia as "linear polyglossia".

learned first with little or no conscious effort), of any degree of linguistic relatedness to the higher valued segments, from stylistic differences to separate languages, for situations perceived as more informal and intimate (Fasold 1984: 53).

Ferguson and Fishman asserted that the compartmentalisation of H and L use in diglossic contexts stabilised societal bilingualism and enhanced language maintenance. However, Chen (1997: 4) remarks that empirical studies, including Ferguson's diglossic case studies, have shown that compartmentalisation of language use may, in fact, not occur because "either intermediate varieties may be used or one variety may be displaced by the other". Such a lack of power symmetry between two languages or varieties results as unstable diglossia, and leads to language shift. Although Ferguson stressed that diglossia may be a long-lasting phenomenon (which is often the case), its actual contribution to stable societal bilingualism still requires more evidence. Diglossic relationships undergo changes which are usually signalled by either leakage in function, or mixing in form (Fasold 1984: 54).

Yet, it may be argued that Fishman expanded Ferguson's definition so much that it lost its 'diglossic validity'. Hogg et al. (1984: 188) claim that "Fishman's approach effectively emasculates diglossia as a term with sociolinguistic utility in distinguishing some linguistic situations from others. All language situations are characterized by functional separation of speech varieties, and are thus examples of diglossia. Fishman has weakened the concept by overgeneralization". In turn, in his article about diglossia and bilingualism, Pap (1982) concludes that it would be best to reject the modifications made to Ferguson's definition of diglossia and adhere to the original version. Similarly, Hawkins (1983) recommends that diglossia should be applied, but with more restricted conditions. He established five criteria which he uses to distinguish between true diglossia and dialect-Creole. Thus, the four defining cases selected by Ferguson are divided by Hawkins into diglossia (Arabic and Greek) and dialect-Creole (Swiss German and Haitian Creole).

On a global scale the concept of diglossia may also be extended to refer to English when adopted for international communication in science and business. There are fears that the overwhelming dominance of English may arrest the development of specialist terminologies in other languages. Deneire (1998: 394) takes a diglossic perspective when he says that "the generalized adoption of English could also lead to a process of secondarization of all languages other than English and the reaction of a 'High variety' and a number of 'Low varieties' of language in science". In all likelihood most sociolinguists would even argue that we are dealing here with a stark imbalance of language power, but the scholar who prefers to resort to more offensive terms is, not unexpectedly, Phillipson:

If the world moves towards a pattern of global diglossia, with English as the language of the haves (including elites in South countries), while the have-nots and never-to-haves are confined to other languages, this would represent one of the most sinister consequences of globalisation, McDonaldisation and linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 1997: 243).

5. Critical evaluation of the concept

Ferguson's definition of diglossia seems to have elicited less controversy than the four defining cases selected to illustrate the concept. Apart from Fishman, who put forward a modification of the definition itself, most scholars have expressed somewhat disapproving opinions concerning the selection of the examples used to validate Ferguson's diglossia. Leaving aside the three other defining cases of diglossia, which have no bearing on this paper, I propose to consider the major criticisms of linguists who focused on Switzerland.

It must be admitted that the language situation in German Switzerland has received relatively little attention. Hogg et al. (1984: 185) claim that Ferguson (1959/1972) neglected the Swiss German situation which, in the end, fails to substantiate his assertion. They (1984: 186) note that despite its high frequency of use, Swiss German has several variations and no fixed linguistic standards. Ferguson (1959/1972: 235) maintained that literature and the written medium belong to the H variety. However, personal correspondence has become the domain of Swiss German, especially with regard to younger people (also Anders 1990: 24, Ris 1990).

Yet, the greatest controversy in the case of Swiss German – repeatedly indicated by many scholars – appears to be the Fergusonian criterion of prestige, perhaps more suited to social and psychological enquiry. Hogg et al. (1984: 187) write: “We would maintain that High German is *not* afforded greater prestige or status than Swiss German, and therefore that German Switzerland does not constitute an example, or indeed defining case, of diglossia. It does not satisfy what can be considered one of the most important of Ferguson's criteria”. The reason for this is to be found in Switzerland's history of isolationism and its desire to be dissociated from Germany, especially since the First World War. Ferguson does not deal with this psychological factor in depth or the generally complex Swiss linguistic identity. The explication of the identity function of language will not be successful if based entirely on linguistic analysis. An insight into the wider context of the relationship between Switzerland and Germany is needed, since this has actual consequences for the identity of the Swiss people. It may be hypothesised that the dubious coexistence of Swiss and Standard German constitutes a highly sensitive language issue in the lives of the Swiss. Hogg et al. (1984: 187) explain that “attempts at differentiation from a German identity (in order to avoid its negative implications for self-description in terms of stereotypes) will take the form of evaluative downgrading of High German”. The conclusion from this reasoning is radically different from that of Ferguson – namely that the L variety is *high* prestige. It has often been remarked that Swiss German is increasingly used, particularly on religious occasions and in scientific contexts (Anders 1990: 24). As a result, Hogg et al. (1984: 193) conclude that “the language situation existing in German Switzerland does not constitute a canonical case of diglossia”.

Watts (1991: 99) argues that Ferguson's account of the facts presents not only a simplistic, but also an erroneous picture of the relationship between the high and low varieties. According to Watts (1997: 277), the assumptions made by Ferguson

are not entirely valid for the German part of Switzerland (also Rash 1998: 49). Again, it is not true that speakers of the Alemannic dialects hold Standard German in higher esteem than their own dialects which naturally results in greater social status for the dialects. Also, the functional distinction between the H and L varieties is not so clear-cut as Ferguson would have liked it. His assumption that diglossic speakers can switch between the dialect and the standard, rests on another less than certain assumption that the speakers, in addition to their dialect, have a satisfactory knowledge of the H variety. Watts (1997: 279) also observes a periodically occurring ‘dialect wave’, or what was earlier defined by Fasold (1984) as a leakage in function, i.e. an increased encroachment of the dialect upon the domains considered by Ferguson the preserve of standard, such as school, religion or the media. It seems that for similar reasons Haugen (1972: 332) calls Ferguson’s (1959) selected L varieties (Swiss German, Dhimotiki Greek, Spoken Arabic and Haitian Creole) a “mixed bag”, pointing to Swiss German as “a prideful symbol of Swiss nationality” and noting that status and intimacy do not necessarily stand in direct contrast. Last but not least, Sebba (2011: 453) draws attention to the question of power in diglossic relationships, an aspect that remained unresolved by either Ferguson or Fishman. Both versions of the diglossia theory failed to account for the power relations in society, as well as to adopt the perspective of either the dominated or the dominating language.

6. Diglossia vs. bilingualism

Although Fishman expanded the original definition of diglossia to any two functionally distinguishable dialects or registers, he believed that it should not be confused with bilingualism. Fishman’s broad diglossia allows for relatedness between language varieties, ranging from those less closely to those more closely related. In the first instance we can speak of *superposed* bilingualism, while in the latter, *style-shifting* (Fasold 1984: 54). Since bilingualism is the ability of an individual to use two or more languages, it is also an area of research within psychology and psycholinguistics. Diglossia, on the other hand, falls within the scope of sociology and sociolinguistics as it describes the functional allocation of at least two language varieties in a society.

Following his considerations of Ferguson’s concept and his own extended definition, Fishman (1967) elaborated on the possible relationships between bilingualism and diglossia. He is the author of the theoretical construct of **diglossia with or without bilingualism** as well as **bilingualism with or without diglossia**. In the case of nations that are fully bilingual and diglossic, all levels of society are practically bilingual and they use the two languages according to their assigned prestige and functions. For Fishman (1967: 31, 1972: 95) the Swiss-German cantons provide an illustration of diglossia with prevalent bilingualism below the national level. In the German-speaking part of the country all, regardless of their age, alternate between the Swiss German dialects and the standard variety in line with their

established functions (Ferguson 1959/1972, Weinreich 1953/1968). In turn, a rare combination of diglossia without bilingualism is found in communities which constitute a political and economic unity, but never managed to form one speech community. Either one or both speech communities have strictly enforced boundaries, which leads to restricted linguistic access and thus the necessity to communicate through intermediaries. Equally rare is the case of bilingualism without diglossia as “it implies a society where two languages are in regular use but without significant status differences between them. In practice, this means two high-status or prestige languages” (Sebba 2011: 451). A contemporary example is Canada, bilingual in English and French at the federal level. Fishman (1972: 105) considers the conditions created by bilingualism without diglossia to be transitional. He writes that “without separate tough complementary norms and values to establish and maintain functional separation of the speech varieties, that language or variety which is fortunate enough to be associated with the predominant drift of social forces tends to displace the others” (Fishman 1972: 105). However, leaving aside the intricacies of the Canadian context, despite being aware of certain linguistic tensions in that country, we can hardly contradict Fishman’s concerns. The last option suggested by Fishman (1972: 106) is neither diglossia nor bilingualism, as yet a purely hypothetical construct.

The distinction between bilingualism and diglossia has also been taken up by Francescato (1986: 396), who argues that it is difficult to tell the two phenomena apart because “the speaker perceives the linguistic diversity in terms of the diversity of roles and statuses of the participants in the situation”. Therefore, when linguistic diversity is used for different social functions it may be referred to either as bilingualism or diglossia. The only clue to the distinction, as originally suggested by Ferguson, is the degree of affinity between the given linguistic variants. Interestingly, Francescato (1986: 397) pointed out a string of crucial dissimilarities by juxtaposing the same features of bilingualism and diglossia. Thus, bilingual learning may be either spontaneous or supervised, while diglossia results from spontaneous learning. Bilingualism is acquired either simultaneously or successively, but diglossia can only be experienced simultaneously. Bilingualism may have an individual or collective character, whereas diglossia is by definition a social phenomenon. Bilingualism is dynamic as opposed to the non-dynamic diglossia where the linguistic behaviour of individual speakers is adjusted to the whole group as “there are no sub-groups with more or less diglossia” (Francescato 1986: 397). Lastly, bilingualism essentially has a balanced character unlike diglossia which is not-balanced, as linguistically it reflects social and cultural situations that are interrelated via varying degree of formality. A comparison of the features listed above lends support to the assumption that linguistically homogenous groups are virtually non-existent, and it is not unusual that most speakers need to alternate between language varieties to control the multitude of social situations. Thus, following Fishman (1967), it is better to presuppose an amalgamation of bilingualism with diglossia.

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