

Diglossia: separate and unequal¹

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Abstract

Whereas diglossia has been traditionally viewed from a static, structural-functional perspective, it can be a force in language shift. The social characterization of two languages in a situation of diglossia is a function of the domains in which each of the languages is used. The extent to which the domains of one language are exclusively associated with social and economic survival will strengthen the position of that language and precipitate language shift. This is illustrated by the recent linguistic history of a rural community in southwestern France, where French has replaced the local dialect of Gascon in the period of a few generations. Interaction between the social evaluations of the languages and their domains led to the progressive stigmatization of Gascon. Reassignment as French domains became a strategy for saving Gascon domains themselves from stigmatization.

Terms such as *code-switching* and *diglossia* are now becoming part of the vocabulary of politics, as the issue arises with increasing insistence in America and abroad, of the accommodation or non-accommodation of government and institutions to vernacular languages. It is becoming increasingly noticeable, for instance, that sociolinguists hesitate to take a position on the issue of teaching standard English to speakers of non-standard dialects in the American public schools, and on what role English should play in bilingual education programs. Many people contend that the schools should provide minority children with the linguistic means (through standard language instruction) to enter the power structure, and concern for the loss of the solidary function of vernacular languages in the minority culture is allayed by a resort to well-known notions from the field of bilingualism. The most important of these notions is *diglossia*, introduced into American linguistics by Charles Ferguson (1959).

Diglossia refers to the use in one community of two languages: a superposed variety, referred to as the 'high' language, which is reserved for use in more public, formal and learned domains; and a vernacular, or 'low', language, used in more popular and intimate domains. Ferguson describes situations (in Arabic, Greek, Haitian and Swiss German communities) in which the high is spoken by an elite as a second language, but points out that the term could be applied in a wider range of situations. In its loosest sense, diglossia is an organizing principle in bilingual and bidialectal communities: a linguistic division of labour whereby each language is limited to its own domain. In current usage, the term *diglossia* is indifferent to whether or not the entire population commands both languages, and in most modern situations at least a portion of the general population does. These individuals organize their own bilingualism around the principle of diglossia: the individual bilingual is a microcosm of the community's linguistic organization. The notion of diglossia brings language choice into the framework of structural linguistics by providing a structural-functional account of behaviour at the community level. Complementary distribution of the coexisting languages virtually eliminates the possibility of random choice, and structures behaviour at the community and discourse level by means similar to those at work in the grammar of each language. It is generally assumed (e.g. Fishman, 1971: 87) that this division of labour allows the speakers to keep the two linguistic systems separate, and thus to retain the structural integrity of each language. Diglossia is frequently seen, therefore, as a structured means of reserving the vernacular for in-group use while speakers use the standard language for entrance into the wider society. In this perspective, therefore, diglossia appears to be a force of stability. It is important at this point to consider the full implications of phenomena like diglossia in relation to current social questions: is diglossia, in fact, an effective means of language maintenance?

Ferguson has pointed out that diglossia can be extremely stable, but only on the condition that the high language be restricted to a literate elite. In other words, this stability is dependent on rigid social stratification. In the subsequent literature, however, the notion of diglossia has been expanded to include a wider variety of complementary arrangements, and to be seen as not just a result, but a contributing force of stability.² Diglossia in its more general definition might be seen therefore as a democratic arrangement insofar as it allows the vernacular to coexist with a high language. The question must be raised, though, whether linguistic domains so defined can be separate but equal. It is this question that I will discuss in the next pages — and I will maintain that diglossia can be not only the very means of elimination of vernacular languages, but also a

serious threat to the self-image and solidarity of the community.

The twentieth century has witnessed a trend for rapid language shift, generally accompanying two kinds of political development: the imposition of foreign languages by colonial powers, and the reversal of this action through the imposition of revived national languages in postcolonial situations. In either case, nation-building virtually always involves language legislation:

... an expanding state, e.g., a colonizing power, will tend to impose one language on all its new subjects, whereas at the time of independence the ex-colonies take their revanche and do likewise as regards the newly appointed national language: it is supposed to supersede the local languages. (Knappert, 1978: 72)

The modern notion of one nation/one language focuses standardization on intra-linguistic regional and ethnic differences as well as on actual bilingualism or multilingualism, and in a broad sense the sociopolitical issues involved are the same no matter how great the difference between the vernacular in question and the standard language. Under rapid industrialization, the promise of socioeconomic mobility has led masses of labouring people to abandon their vernacular languages in favour of the standard language associated with those in control of the means of production. Fishman characterizes a community undergoing this process of language shift as non-diglossic, since the social change has been too quick to allow linguistic accommodation on a community level:

Under circumstances such as these no well-established, socially recognized and protected functional differentiation of languages obtains in many speech communities of the lower and lower middle classes. (1971: 87)

According to Fishman, this transitional situation can follow a period of diglossia (with or without bilingualism), but it is functionally separate from diglossia. This shift, therefore, generally results in the impoverishment and death of the vernacular. However, it might be well to consider the relation between diglossia and this kind of rapid shift. Are these developments so separate from the diglossia that precedes or are they a logical outcome of diglossia under certain (most current) sociopolitical conditions?

Martinet (1963) chooses to distinguish between community and individual diglossia, referring to linguistic complementarity within the community as *diglossia*, and within the linguistic habits of the individual as *bilingualism*. Whatever, community diglossia with bilingualism cannot exist unless the bilingual individuals themselves experience diglossia in

their own speech habits. The fate of an individual's bilingualism, then, is closely tied up with that of the community, and diglossia has a very personal effect on bilingual individuals. The question of concern here is what happens to a community that is characterized at least in part by the sharing of the vernacular language, when that language is supplanted by the language of the wider society. The breakdown of diglossia in a community is associated with differing abilities among members of the community to enter the wider society, and the question of the importance of diglossia stems from concern for the community that remains. Insofar as it is desirable to retain the vernacular as an important component of the life of a solidary group within a larger community, we must examine with care the extent to which the loss of the vernacular can result in the loss of community.

Diglossia does not arise; it is imposed from above in the form of an administrative, ritual or standard language. By virtue of its political and economic status, this language becomes requisite for access to power and mobility within the society. Therefore, diglossia cannot be socially or politically neutral, and it is clearly in view of this that Ferguson (1959) refers to the languages in a situation of diglossia as 'high' and 'low'. It is the availability of the high language to the masses (through free public education) that renders a language standard and thus democratic; but this does not render diglossia neutral. While the availability of the standard may provide opportunity for the individual who can master it through formal education, it has a different effect on the vernacular-speaking community as a whole. The functions of the standard language exist in opposition to those of the vernacular, and this opposition can operate as a powerful force of assimilation, by interacting with and reinforcing social evaluation of the domains in which the two languages are used.

The very existence of a high implies a low, and the imposition of the standard language creates an immediate social opposition between the standard and the vernacular. This sets up a situation that one might think could remain stable, but that under most circumstances will become dynamic through a continual redefinition of the standard and the vernacular, and of their domains. The notion of diglossia is probably as satisfactory to linguists as it is because it corresponds closely to our models of linguistic structure. This analogy can be taken a good deal further, for structure is both a force that allows speakers to store the system and a force that gives rise to shifts within the system over time. Structuralist studies of linguistic change attribute paradigmatic shifts to pressures within the paradigm (Martinet, 1952). The same can be said of the structure of linguistic interaction governed by diglossia. This will be illustrated in the following pages by a historical account of a situation in

which diglossia was a stage in total and rapid language shift, and in which one can say that diglossia actually organized the shift.

Until the turn of this century, the majority of the rural population in France still spoke non-French varieties as their only or first language. These varieties were either Celtic (in Brittany), Basque (on the southwestern border with Spain) or indigenous Romance varieties. Romance varieties spoken in the southern half of France (Occitania) are commonly referred to as Occitan varieties, or dialects of the *Langue d'Oc*. These Occitan varieties comprise a continuum of dialects, all mutually incomprehensible with French. This language group, which provided the earliest (from the twelfth century) of the Romance literary languages (Hall, 1974: 118), are all now stigmatized as 'peasant' dialects. Their literary and general public function has been taken over by French, the language of centralization. Although these varieties are all clearly separate languages from French, by any criteria, their interior social status, combined with their clear genetic relation to French has given rise to a common belief that they are 'dialects of French'.

French was officially introduced into Occitania with the edict of Villers Cotterets (1539), which required that all official documents be written in French. Lafont's characterization of this development as the beginning of diglossia and the end of Occitan autonomy (1971) is only too apt. From this moment forth, French became the language of writing, and this early characterization of French and Occitan as respectively 'written' and 'spoken' has never been overcome. This has led to a powerful characterization of the ideas expressed in the two languages: the one worthy and the other unworthy of publication. The official limitation of literacy to French has served in turn as an important barrier to intra-regional communication.

Until the Revolution of 1789, there was no official desire to teach French to the peasants; on the contrary, it was understood that if the rural population learned French they would be able to leave the land, where they were needed to guarantee the food supply of France. In the cause of the French economy, village schools were often discouraged (Brun, 1923: 432 ff.). With the Revolution came the resolve to teach French to the entire population in the interests of democracy, to encourage popular participation in government. As part of the ideology of liberation through standard language, the local dialects were seen as symbols and agents of oppression, and as such were to be eliminated — supplanted rather than supplemented by French. The suppression of non-French varieties in France has been dramatically accelerated over the past century of rapid industrialization. Political and economic centralization has forced workers to leave their regions in pursuit of socioeconomic advancement, and

has thus made the French language a necessary means to advancement and has denigrated regional languages in the linguistic marketplace. Regional languages, therefore, have become symbols of regionalist movements, which see the suppression of their languages as both a tool and a result of the 'colonization' of the provinces of France by the central power structure. The history of the introduction of French into the large southern region of Occitania shows this to be true: language shift has been a means as well as a result of social change. Lafont (1971) has pointed to diglossia as the ultimate Occitan compromise, and it is clear that the effectiveness with which this shift has occurred can be attributed at least in part to the diglossia with which it began.

The French language was a 'presence' for some time before it was actually introduced as a spoken language. It penetrated the region through the top of the social hierarchy, and through large communities, from which it then spread to rural areas. In the nineteenth century, rural dwellers encountered French when they went outside the village and when outsiders came into the village. But the average rural person was not called upon to use French, and one needed only Occitan to function and live inside the village. The language of the village (Occitan) was simply opposed to the language of the outside (French). But the outside was clearly where the power flowed from, and this association would serve in subsequent years to pull French into an increasing range of uses.

The following is a sketch of the advance of French into one Occitan community. This sketch has been reconstructed through interviews and discussions with the current population of the community.³ Since practically the entire shift from Occitan to French has occurred during the lifetimes of the oldest current inhabitants, whose parents were monolingual Occitan speakers and whose grandchildren are monolingual French speakers, the history of this shift can be reconstructed on the basis of these people's recollections. The community in question is located in the Pyrenees of Ariège, within the bundle of isoglosses that separate the two Occitan dialect areas of Gascony and Languedoc. The language of the community is classified as Gascon (and I will refer to it as such from now on) because it shares features traditionally diagnostic of Gascon.⁴ It is significant, however, that the speakers are not aware that their language is a Gascon variety. The stigmatization of the dialect of this area is no doubt heightened by the area's cultural and linguistic distance from central Gascony — a distance that renders their language and culture 'non-standard' in relation to the accepted norms of the centre of the region.

The community, a small commune made up of six villages, lost its main economic base after the Revolution, when the government took over the domain lands for forestry — and thus denied the region its essential

grazing land (Chevalier, 1956). This resulted in a long period of guerilla warfare (Baby, 1972) but the ultimate result was the impoverishment and swift depopulation of the entire region. The total population of the villages that make up this commune has fallen to about 300, from a population of 2,000 a century ago. The remaining population consists of older people subsisting on a small number of cows, and those younger people who have either amassed larger amounts of land or who have found alternative livelihoods (in particular skilled and unskilled labour in the surrounding area). The adult population of the commune is consciously transitional — they have encouraged their children to leave the region to find work, and in preparation for this they have raised them as monolingual French speakers.

The elimination of Gascon was part of the elimination of the peasant economy; thus very directly, French has long been the means to economic mobility and Gascon has been stigmatized as both a barrier to mobility and a symbol of peasant poverty. The practical necessity of leaving the village led the population to stress school and acquisition of French for their children. The speed with which this has led to total language shift is striking, and attributable to the social relation between the two languages in the community. The following description of the evolution of this relation is intended as an illustration of the dynamics that a structured relation can give rise to. The structured coexistence that characterizes diglossia can create the dynamics for change as well as a means of stability. Particularly, since the languages are put into contact through social change, language choice can become a term in a paradigm defined by social roles. Within this paradigm, social and linguistic roles evolve in relation to each other. If we consider the community organization of language use in terms of speech events as put forth by Hymes (1972), diglossia can be roughly defined as the assignment of each language to its own set of events. The events of the community, then, are defined partially by the language they occur in, and each language in turn is defined by its events. Language shift, then, can involve the gradual encroachment of one language on the events of the other.

1. Setting up an opposition

To some extent a high language brings its own speech events with it when it is introduced into a low speaking community. These events, in turn, become part of the official justification for the imposition of the high on the population. The high is the language of its speech events, and participation in these events is seen as necessarily requiring the use of the high.

French actually penetrated the community in question in its own situations. Its major step into the community was with free public education, where it was the only language of the classroom. As the language of the classroom and of the government that had set up the school, French remained very much an outside language. For school comprised not only a small number of speech events, it affected a relatively small portion of the population at the start. But as social change brings new speech events (school, conversations with outsiders, official consultations) it also eliminates old ones. Along with these events disappear the verbal genres that characterized them. Ghost stories lost currency along with the long events of communal work that had provided their setting, and ranking songs disappeared as their setting — the cafe — lost its intimacy and became an increasingly frequent setting for encounters with outsiders.

Even in its marginal capacity, French entered a structured relation with Gascon. With the introduction of French in its own domains, Gascon ceased to be adequate for all situations within the village. It became 'inappropriate' in the school, and schoolteachers instilled in their pupils emotionally-loaded constraints on the use of Gascon in school situations. This is typical of situations where the high language is being introduced in the schools, and it is not normally done by gentle means. Punishments for speaking the low language in school frequently embody the establishment's characterization of that language. In Occitania a common practice was to tie a wooden shoe (an albatross of peasantry) around the offender's neck. In U.S. schools children have been punished for speaking American Indian languages with whipping, having their mouths washed out with soap, and even (as recently as 1970) having their heads flushed in the toilet.⁵ There can be no ambiguity in such messages. While the children are learning the appropriate use of the high in the classroom, there is no reverse temptation: no tendency to use the high in low situations. Any supposed onus on the inappropriate use of the high in low domains in such a situation is a purely theoretical construct. The low is in actuality the 'trespasser', and this notion of linguistic trespassing puts the low always in the wrong.

Corollary to the inappropriateness of Gascon in the school situation is the popular notion of its 'inadequacy'. French teachers were trained to believe that a person limited by a peasant dialect could not pursue logical, abstract thought. This is similar to arguments put forth by Bereiter and Engleman (1966) in America for the necessity of teaching standard English to preschool speakers of the Black English vernacular. This notion of linguistic 'inadequacy' can become somewhat of a self-fulfilling prophecy insofar as the disuse of a language in any domain will result in at least lexical impoverishment. Since the original domains of high, further-

more, are frequently new domains to the community, the low sets out in its relationship with high with a built-in lexical deficit.

2. Bringing the opposition into the community

When the high and the low languages interact at the periphery of community life, the social oppositions associated with the opposition between the two languages are relatively simple and immaterial to the life of the community. It is when the high enters the actual life of the community that it enters into a more meaningful opposition with the low. The economic and educational association of the high makes the low uneducated and poor by comparison. And as language differences come to be associated with social differences with increasing frequency and in an increasing variety of situations, the social meanings associated with each language become increasingly complex. This complexity is always along the same general lines — the high being opposed to low as powerful to powerless, and the social detail that accrues to this opposition only serves to bring this closer to home.

Where the community in question had been defined by its own language, the introduction of French events established an opposition within the community between French and Gascon events. From that moment, an opposition began to arise between individuals who had the means (whose parents could afford to free them from agricultural production) to participate in these events and those who had not. As education became more universal in the community, the community became more bilingual. This had the highly significant result that one no longer needed to speak Gascon to live and function in the community, and the government and the church could send representatives there who spoke only French. French thus entered certain public events that had previously been in the Gascon domain. The increasingly frequent participation of outsiders in daily life came to redefine many public conversations as French, and to make public places potential settings for French. The opposition between French and Gascon thereby moved from 'outside/inside' to 'public/private', and as those oppositions were encountered in more speech events, the social oppositions between the French- and Gascon- speaking participants were increasingly exercised in conjunction with language choice. French became associated with a widening variety of contacts with mainstream society, emphasizing the concomitant retreat of Gascon to events associated with decreasing power.

3. Bringing the opposition home

As members of the low speaking community become more mobile, they find that they associate some of their own traits and aspirations with the high domains. Because of the linguistic division of labour, they cannot develop an adequate self-image in terms of the low, and they come to incorporate the high into their self-image. Thus the need to express different aspects of their own personalities in different languages leads to code-switching. In this sense, code-switching is an internalized diglossia.

As villagers armed themselves with French, they left the community with increasing frequency to join the economic mainstream. They themselves became associated with French in the minds of the villagers, and they returned to visit the village with monolingual French-speaking spouses and children. This led those still in the village to compare themselves on a daily basis with people once close to them who had become distanced through their use of French and their associated mobility. This moved the opposition between 'outside/inside' people and 'public/private' events to very personal oppositions based on differences between people who had 'succeeded' and those who had been 'left behind'. Through constant juxtaposition in ever more intimate domains, the community continued to redefine the opposition between French and Gascon. French, always moving from above, brought with it its lofty connotations, and gradually replaced Gascon in its own loftier functions, leaving Gascon increasingly impoverished not only in use but in reputation. As the use of Gascon was associated with increasingly modest domains, the very use of French began to have the power of dignifying situations. This led eventually to code-switching: an indication that the individual's self-image had come to incorporate both languages. At this point, people began to raise their children entirely in French, so that they would themselves be associated with the positive values of that language.

The experience in Occitania is just one of many examples that show how diglossia can not only provide the means of organized synchronic bilingualism, but can actually organize language shift. The association of certain domains with dominant values creates a situation in which one language must disappear for the community to retain a positive self-image. The decision as to which language that will be is heavily weighted by economic considerations. In the case of this Gascon community, regional poverty had become so great that the adoption of French was seen early on as a simple survival mechanism, and only later as a relinquishing of local prerogatives. French was extended as the sole requisite for socioeconomic advancement, but as it turned out, acquisition of a second language from outside could not take place without the

concomitant acquisition of the outsider's view of the community itself. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that the vehicle for this acquisition of a new self-image was the very division of linguistic labour that facilitated the entry of French into the community.

The process that this community underwent was a logical outcome of the assumption that use of a high language will provide access, acceptance and adequacy in the wider society. When a group speaking low is eager for socioeconomic advancement, and the group in charge of the means of production uses the high as a means (or barrier) to that advancement, the path of least resistance is to accept the high language along with the high speech events. Those speakers who have more opportunity to participate in these events will tend to be the more successful, and the opposition between their personal qualities and those of the rest of the low speaking population will become associated with the social meanings of the two languages. The next step is for the speakers of high to extend the need for high into previously low events. This is concurrent with a growing tendency for speakers of low to elevate these very events by using high in them. This in turn reflects negatively on the events that remain low: the low gradually retreats into increasingly powerless domains, and — more insidiously — stigmatizes these domains by their association with the low language.

There is a wide variety of situations of diglossia throughout the world, each with its own particular history, and some apparently more stable than others. The abandonment of vernaculars is clearly a survival strategy employed with an intensity that varies from case to case according to a wide range of social and economic factors. But in any situation in which linguistic labour is divided according to domain, any gain for the high must be, by structural definition, a loss for the low. It is clear, then, that the only circumstances under which the use of two languages within a community can be 'separate but equal' is when equal means the same domains, not the same number of domains. If the language of a community does not serve all the needs of that community, and express all the interests of its people, there is a serious danger of division and ultimate dissolution of the community.

Received 1 June 1980
Revised version received
27 March 1981

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Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference *New Ways of Analyzing Variation in English VIII*, Montreal, October 25–27, 1979.
2. This is my interpretation of Wexler's statement, 'By stability, Ferguson probably means the resistance of diglossia to attempts to resolve it' (1971: 331, fn 2).
3. These observations were made during eighteen months of participant-observation in this community in 1970–1971, in the pursuit of a study of sociolinguistic variation. The research was supported in part by National Science Foundation dissertation grant #NSF-GS-3211.
4. Latin /f/ has gone to [h] (L. *focus*, *huk* 'fire'), Latin /-ll-/ has gone to [r] (L. *bella*, *bero* 'pretty' fem.), the use of the affirmative particle *ke* (*ke boli aygwo* 'I want water').
5. Gary Witherspoon, personal communication.

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