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FB 14 – Seminar für Englische Philologie
Abteilung Amerikanistik und Neueste Anglistik
Kurs: Proseminar “Bilingualism – Multilingualism”
Leitung: Dr. habil. G. Lampert
Wintersemester 2000/2001

Diglossia: A Critical Discussion of the Phenomenon

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Slavistik (5)
Amerikanistik (5)
Geschichte (5)

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1. Introduction

‘Diglossia’ is a relatively new technical term and so far scarcely known, although the phenomenon this technical term describes takes place in everyday life. Diglossia is a complex process as is already indicated by a great range of various definitions. The complexity of diglossia is linked with the nature of language, its interchange and its development.

In the underlying discussion of diglossia, this paper will go beyond questions like ‘What is diglossia?’, ‘Under which circumstances does it occur?’ and ‘What examples could be mentioned?’. In order to treat these questions more profoundly concepts like ‘codeswitching’, ‘idiolect’, ‘bilingualism’ will be taken into consideration.

In the following, various linguistic approaches will be compared. Each of them will be looked at in relation to the light of diglossia. The aim of this discussion is to check the evidence of diglossia to prove its existence, to relate it to other terms, to indicate problematic points, to draw conclusions as far as the consequences of linguistic interchange are concerned.

The first four chapters are devoted to the discussion of the meaning and the existence of linguistic features concerning bilingualism. In the end of every chapter the respective connection with diglossia is to be researched. Moreover, within the following two chapters the term ‘language’ is redefined in its functional meaning.

2. Definition(s) of Diglossia

The term *διγλωσσος* as an adjective is found in Thucydides meaning knowing two languages. The term *διγλωσσια* was not used in its modern linguistic sense during the Antique or Byzantine Period. The Linguist Jean Psichari (1854-1929) introduced this term to explain the juxtaposition of the Greek archaic Standard Language (“*katharvousa*”) and the Greek colloquial language (*démotiki*)” In Greek, diglossia simply means bilingualism (Niehoff-Panagiotidis 1997:271; Landry 1994:16).

Charles Ferguson redefined diglossia as a sociolinguistic situation in which “two or more varieties of the same language are used by some speakers under different conditions” (Ferguson 1959:325). Still today, the Encyclopaedia Britannica and the Hutchinson Dictionary of Difficult Words define diglossia as the coexistence of two forms of the same language, one form higher and more prestigious and the other lower and commonly spoken. “The low variety is generally used in informal, oral contexts and the high variety in formal, often written contexts” (Baker 1998:118). Ferguson determined norms for 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 standard), there is a highly 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 a community for ordinary conversation. (Ferguson 1959:336)

In fact, the concept of diglossia could be generally extended to every situation in which the written and spoken language differ (Binder 2000:56).

Schiffmann differentiated between diglossia and 'standard with dialects'. "In diglossia, *no one* speaks the H[igh] variety as a mother tongue, only the L[ow] variety. In the standard with dialects situation, some speakers speak H as a mother tongue, while others speak L varieties as a mother tongue and acquire H as a second system" (Schiffmann 1997:207).

In 1967, Joshua Fishman opened the idea of diglossia to two languages existing side by side within a single geographical area; one language usually more prestigious (Fishman 2000:81-2). "Diglossia would then become the term for a situation in which different varieties (either of the same language or of different languages) have a functional distribution" (Fernández 1996:289-90). For example, "Jewish marriage contracts are still written in Aramaic, continuing a tradition that goes back all the way to the pre-Common Era. Moreover, Aramaic was the language that was used for explaining the Torah" (Hudson 1993:499). This slight difference between these two definitions has not yet been resolved:

Arabists for instance still operate with the older definition, and it is very common to hear statements to the effect that in Egypt there is diglossia, whereas in North Africa there is bilingualism. What they mean with such a statement is that the linguistic varieties in Egypt "belong to the same language," whereas in North Africa two different languages, Arabic and French, as well as the low variety of one of the two, are in use. (Fernández 1996:289)

Fishman himself also operates with the terms 'high' and 'low' to describe diglossic situations. However, in some cases it is not easy to clearly differentiate between standard and/or written language and dialectal/spoken variety. Just think of the Swiss German speakers who use Modern Standard German as 'necessary lingua franca' in Switzerland and abroad, but in other cases reject the usage of *Hochdeutsch* (Hudson 1993:503 and Rash 2001:74). Because of unstable divisions of domains, the diglossic situation in Switzerland is to be classed as "leaking" (Rash 1998: 52-3). Furthermore, status and function of a language change. French and other Roman languages were initially regarded as 'Vulgar Latin'. "The spoken variety [of Mandarin] which had evolved, gradually replaced the dying Classical variety, initially only as a spoken language, but with time also as a functional written variety" (Hudson 1993:500).

Even the language of criminal subcultures, like argot, will be adopted by the dominant society “in order to regenerate its linguistic repertoire” (Kaplan 1990:143). These changes have always been in process. On the whole, the history of languages is one of the replacements of archaic standard fixed languages by new varieties or of one standard language by another.

Diglossia is clearly context-oriented. It also exists among monolinguals. “When monolinguals talk, they often change their language to suit whom they are talking to and the context. For example, monolinguals may change their accent and speed of talking, or use different vocabulary” (Baker 1998:51). The number ‘zero’ in different domains turns into ‘nil’ in soccer, ‘naught’ or ‘o [oo]’ in mathematics, ‘love’ in tennis. Monolinguals can make use of or at least understand different codes such as *Alte Rechtschreibung* and *Neue Rechtschreibung*. They may use another language without knowing the meaning of the words used, e.g. by repeating excerpts of a song written in a foreign language. They also know to use different styles – at least in a passive way – in reading newspapers, official documents, and scientific papers. Monolinguals may talk only their dialect but be able to understand others.

3. Bilingualism

According to the glossary in Li Wei’s “Bilingualism Reader” (2000), bilinguality is “a psychological state of the individual who has access to more than one linguistic code as a means of social communication.” Grosjean’s definition extends bilingualism from a psychological state of the individual to the real use of two or more languages by one person:

We will call ‘bilingual’ those people who use two, or more, languages (or dialects) in their everyday lives. Bilinguals are not the sum of two complete or incomplete monolinguals but have a unique and specific linguistic configuration. They have developed competencies in their languages to the extent required by their needs and those of the environment. They normally use their languages – separately or together – for different purposes, in different domains of life, with different people. Because the needs and uses of the languages are usually quite different, bilinguals are rarely equally or completely fluent in their languages. Levels of fluency in a language will depend on the need for that language and will be domain-specific, hence the ‘fossilised’ competencies of many bilinguals in their different languages. As the environment changes and the needs for particular skills also change, so will the bilinguals’ competence in these various language skills. New situations, new environments, new interlocutors will involve new linguistic needs and will therefore change the language configuration of the person involved. (Grosjean 1995:259-60)

The above definition of bilingualism is very similar to the definition of diglossia. But, while “[b]ilingualism refers to an individual’s ability to use more than one language, diglossia refers to society’s use of two language varieties” (Baker 1998:118). Bilingualism is a psycholinguistic notion, diglossia is a sociolinguistic one (Fernández 1996:289):

A major, characteristic distinction between diglossic and bilingual situations is in the way language acquisition takes place. Whereas in the latter, the child acquires both varieties (or languages) at a very early age, in the former, one of the varieties (or languages) is never used for interaction in the household, and will therefore only be acquired as an L2 [second language] at a later age. The cases of Guaraní vs. Spanish and of Schwyzerdütsch vs. High German may serve here as instances of diglossia. ... Cases of bi- and trilingualism were (and partly are still) extremely common in the countries making up the former Austrian-Hungarian empire. (Hudson 1993:494)

For Fishman, individual bilingualism and diglossia exist in communities in which “almost everyone will be able to use both the high language variety and the low language variety. The high language is used for one set of functions, the low language for a separate set of functions.” And diglossia without bilingualism is “two languages within a particular geographical area. One group of inhabitants will speak one language, another group a different language” (Baker 1998:118). In this case, there are enormously many places in the world where diglossia with or without bilingualism are common (e.g. Flemish and French in Belgium, English and Welsh in Wales, English and Irish in Ireland, General American and African American Vernacular English in the USA, but also different language in European Union which is based on political and geographical principles). In fact, if the geographical distribution is understood as a kind of functional distribution, almost every geographical area combining two or more states with different official languages could be regarded as a diglossic one.

4. Codeswitching

Codeswitching means the change “from one language to another in the course of conversation” (Wei 2000:16), but also from one dialect or style of one language to another dialect or style of still the same language (Scotton 1988:157). The first language may be called the “base language, recipient language or matrix language”; the second language may be called the “donor language or embedded language” (Baker 1998:58). In employing codeswitching speakers act “rationally because codeswitching makes optimal use of the resources in their linguistic repertoires” (Scotton 2000:1259). The alternation from one language to another takes places in terms of three main factors: “topic, person, and tension” (Mackey 2000:39). Codeswitching may be used to emphasize a particular point in a conversation, to reinforce a request, to communicate friendship or family bonding, to interject remarks and questions into a conversation, to ease tension and inject humor into a conversation, to change attitudes or relationships, to exclude people from a conversation, to introduce certain topics, to create distance, to create a conflict and to neutralize it (Baker 1998:60; Heller 1988b:82-3). “Sometimes the code contrast is used to point up group

differences even within the community” (Patrick 1988:136). The working of codeswitching depends on speakers who “see both codes as salient indices of the values they incorporate in their identities, at least in the social context where it occurs” (Scotton 1998:99-100). It is “a conversational strategy used to establish, cross or destroy group boundaries; to create, evoke or change interpersonal relations with their accompanying right and obligations” (Gal 1988:247). Codeswitching is an integral part of idiolect. “Idiolect is a specific way of speaking of one individual. Every individual possess his/her idiolect” (Ammon 2000:285).

Meanwhile, different kinds of codeswitching have become of scientific interest. The most frequent differentiation is made between ‘unmarked’ and ‘marked’ codeswitching. “‘Unmarked’ generally means ‘conventional, neutral, unremarkable’ while ‘marked’ tends to mean ‘positive, unconventional, out of the ordinary, remarkable’” (Baker 1998:59). African-Americans, for instance, exercise marked codeswitching “in order to ‘change the balance of rights and obligations between participants’” (Scotton 1995:304). Another difference is to be seen between ‘discourse-related’ and ‘participant-related’ code-switching:

The former contributes mainly to the structural organization of the on-going conversation, by establishing a contrast in language choice between two continuous stretches of talk, while the latter invites assessment by participants of the speaker’s preference for and competence in one language or the other. (Wei 1995:284)

Tabouret-Keller (1995) defined three types of constraints placed on codeswitching: “biological, social, and linguistic” (qtd. in Dolitsky 2000:1388).

Diglossia is discourse-related codeswitching. Because it is topic-oriented and consequently also participant-oriented, conditions prescribing diglossia are, as in the case of codeswitching, often of social and linguistic nature. Indeed, “[t]he notion of separate domains, whatever it corresponds to in linguistic structure, is ... fundamental to codeswitching” (Heller 1988a:7); “[c]odeswitching is, first and foremost, a social phenomenon” (Halmari 1997:103).

5. Borrowings

“Language borrowing is the term used to indicate foreign loan words or phrases that have become an integral and permanent part of the recipient language” (Baker 1998:59). For Scotton, borrowing can be not only intra- or extra-sentential, but also intra-word (Scotton 1990:85). “[M]ost borrowings show phonological integration, many clearly established borrowings show little or none” (Scotton 1990:101). Both codeswitching and language borrowings or loan words “can be morphologically and phonologically integrated or un-integrated with the surrounding language, depending on a wide variety of personal and linguistic factors” (Penelope 1995:73-4). The un-integrated borrowings do not take all of the morphological/phonological patterns of the host language and are therefore also called

spontaneous borrowings (Pandharipande 1990:17). On its part, *semicodeswitching* is an umbrella term for borrowings and other relexification phenomena” (Halmari 1997:168). The dividing boundary between codeswitching and borrowing is fluent. According to Gardner Chloros, “the distinction between code-switching and loans is of a ‘more or less’ and not an absolute nature” (qtd. in Scotton 1990:101); “assimilation is a gradient, not a categorical, concept, and can provide us only with a continuum as a metric for evaluation” (Scotton 1988:159). Due to the morphological dynamic and static interference a foreign word can turn into a loan word:

Static interference occurs when influence from one of the bilingual’s language is present relatively permanently in the other language. Accent, intonation and the pronunciation of individuals’ sounds are three common areas where static interference may be present. . . .

Dynamic interference occurs when features from one language are transferred temporarily into the other language. Interference can occur at any level of language (syntax, phonology, vocabulary) and in either written or spoken language. (Baker 1998:58)

According to Ferguson, diglossia is “a relatively stable language situation” (see above). Consequently, diglossia can be regarded as a morphophonemic, grammatical, patterned borrowing. Loan words enrich the vocabulary of a language; diglossia enriches a language as a system of communication and expression of ideas.

The qualitative difference among diglossia, codeswitching and borrowing is, in fact, a quantitative one: the degree of integration of one language, code or system into another language, code or system. What about foreign names entering one’s mother tongue? How about names containing phonological features uncommon in your language, but still pronounceable even by a monolingual (e.g. the imbedding of diphthongs such as [] or [] in an otherwise German spoken text) ? Is that codeswitching? According to Haugen: “The introduction of elements from one language into the other means merely an alteration of the second language, not a mixture of the two” (Milroy 1995:8). In this case, we can treat the imbedding of elements such as diglossia or codeswitching into a language as an alteration of this language rather than a mixture of two, and we can put the acquirement of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and semantics from the foreign language on a par with the enrichment of the vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and semantics of one’s mother tongue. On the other hand, we can call the change of accent and speed of talking, or the use of loan words and different vocables like synonyms, technical terms or styles among monolinguals codeswitching and usage of several languages.

6. Translation

The existence of two different languages is proved by the possibility to translate from one language into another and vice versa. If the translation is complete, i.e. every denotation and connotation of every proposition truly interpreted and transformed in another code, you may call them two languages. The definition of diglossia is based on the use of two languages or varieties. As follows, the opportunity of translation from one language (code) into another should be guaranteed. In reality, if “[t]here is a simple almost one to one relationship between language usage and social context so that each variety can be seen as having a distinct place of function within the local speech repertoire” (McClure 1988:33), a complete translation is hardly possible. As it was mentioned above, diglossia has its reasons to exist, the use of diglossia is more or less connected with certain preconditions. In fact, the definition of diglossia *forbids* translation.

If translation is nevertheless possible, the existential question to be asked is what diglossia is (necessary) for and whether diglossia still exists at all. Maybe Martin Luther wondered about this question, and as a result he indeed translated the Bible into German and in this way put aside one case of diglossia. On the other hand, diglossia still exists in the orthodox liturgy (Binder 2000:55-6). The text of the orthodox liturgy can be transferred into modern language in order to be comprehensible. However, the translated text is not of the same value and moreover very often loses plenty connotations. (Compare also Koran and Arabic.) Technical language, highly stylized text, even poetry enjoy the same attitude.

7. Language

The chief purpose of every language is to maintain communication. Consequently, every language must be covering. ‘Covering’ means every speaker has enough linguistic tools to express himself/herself and to describe his/her environment. If a language is not covering, it is not a ‘completed language’.

The language of animals, Eskimo’s, high-tech people suits their respective needs. For a certain period of time indigenous peoples (e.g. Native Americans) managed with their (smaller) vocabulary. Their language expressed their life, their environment and was sufficient for these goals. During the invasion, colonization, urbanization, industrialization, etc. they depended on borrowing from the vocabulary of other languages. Their own (native) language was no longer sufficient enough to describe the new things, circumstances and procedures with which they were suddenly confronted. Moreover, they were forced to communicate with the arriving newcomers. This challenge was one of the many reasons why many indigenous languages were doomed to die out.

Where Hungarian is seen as economically useless, one has to switch to German (Gal 1988:253-4). If the vocabulary of one language is not sufficient enough to discuss a topic one has to switch to other language. This codeswitching is diglossia at the same time. With the help of loan words and—if there are not enough of them—two or more languages one covers the description of his/her own world – material and not material, real or imagined. “Words from the two languages did not belong to two different speech systems but to one” (Genesee 2000:327). One is not bilingual, because he/she cannot translate from one language to another, at least satisfactorily. In fact, one and his/her countrymen make use in this case only of one language. This language—like Arabic as a diglossic language (Fernández 1996:290)—is a mixture of two or more languages in common sense of this word, but it is also a new language having effect like every other language on identity and culture: “Bilinguals develop a culture and identity of their own that has little in common with the two original identities and cultures” (Hamers 1994:268).

8. Conclusion

As this paper has shown, the difficulties of defining diglossia, bilingualism, monolingualism, codeswitching, borrowing and even language are immense. Moreover, the characteristic examples of these linguistic phenomena in the present may be questionable in the future. By taking a closer look it becomes clear that the chief difficulties are caused by the vague definitions, vague because based on other vaguely defined terms changing by and by. If we want to research successively the reasons of existence of two or more languages in one community, we should define the term ‘language’ more precisely and find out the real number of languages used. As it was mentioned above, diglossia is a sociolinguistic notion. But every society consists of individuals and they speak their languages, i.e. diglossia like bilingualism and codeswitching is a psycholinguistic notion as well. If language is defined from this point of view, diglossia is not an alteration of languages, but a way of using the language, a way of juggling with one’s own available linguistic proficiency.

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