

A Critical Review of The Theory of Diglossia: A Call to Action

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: July 24, 2019
Accepted: August 27, 2019
Published: September 30, 2019
Volume: 2
Issue: 5
DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2019.2.5.38

KEYWORDS

*theory; classical diglossia;
extended diglossia; societal
bilingualism; functional
distribution*

ABSTRACT

This study outlines Ferguson's (1959) classical diglossia and Fishman's (1967) extended diglossia and refers to the modifications and extensions this concept has undergone since Ferguson's (1959) original definition. The purpose is to show how Ferguson's diglossia differs from the extensions formulated by other linguists and discuss the various critiques that the theory of diglossia has received in the years that followed. As stated by Ferguson (1959) himself, classical diglossia was intended to describe only the cases where genetically related varieties are used. Therefore, I argue that diglossia should maintain its original meaning so that a coherent theory of diglossia can be created by focusing on the implications and outcomes that such diglossic societies can have in relation to other sociolinguistic phenomena (such as identity, language attitudes, and language contact). Mixing diglossic and bilingual/multilingual cases because the language varieties involved are in functional distribution, possibly makes each phenomenon less valuable as they deserve special investigation and, a theory of their own.

1. INTRODUCTION

A diglossic situation may involve variation within the same language; that is, Ferguson's (1959) concept of classical diglossia, or different languages as in Fishman's (1967) concept of extended diglossia. Although the French term 'diglossie' was originally introduced by Marçais (1930) in order to describe the Arabic situation ('La diglossie arabe'), it was Charles Ferguson who later developed a theory of diglossia as applied to the high and low varieties (Kaye, 2001). Diglossia was further adopted and developed by other researchers who applied the concept in order to describe diglossic and/or bilingual situations in the world.

This critical overview describes Ferguson's (1959) classic diglossia and Fishman's (1967) extended diglossia and refers to other important extensions of the concept, as well as to various critiques that the theory of diglossia has received until today. The purpose of this paper is not only to present the concept of diglossia and its extensions but also to critically highlight the fact that Ferguson's intention of restricting 'diglossia' to situations where only genetically related varieties are involved was well-

justified. The reason for this is that after Fishman's extension of the term diglossia is mostly viewed in terms of one important feature of it: the functional/complementary distribution. Specifically, diglossia is often used to describe situations where various languages are involved and distributed in specific domains of use without examining all the other defining features posited by Ferguson. As a result, the concept of diglossia has lost many of its original characteristics, and it is often viewed as equal to functional distribution of languages in society.

This aim of this paper is to highlight the fact that despite the valuable contribution of Fishman and many other scholars to the theory of diglossia, the extensions of the term deviate from its original formulation, and consequently ignore the importance of the implications that research on classical diglossic cases would have brought. In other words, this study proposes viewing diglossic societies from Ferguson's point of view and focusing on the development of a theory of diglossia as this was Ferguson's (1959) initial goal. In the same way, bilingual/multilingual societies where different languages are in complementary contribution should constitute a

different sociolinguistic phenomenon and deserve a theory of their own.

2. AN OVERVIEW OF THE THEORY OF DIGLOSSIA

2.1 Ferguson's diglossia

In his original article on diglossia, Ferguson's (1959) aim was to examine a linguistic situation where two or more varieties of a language, that is, two genetically related varieties, the *high variety* (henceforth H) and the *low variety* (henceforth L), are used alongside each other in a speech community with each having a definite role to play. In Ferguson's (1959) original article definition, H is described as a highly codified and complex variety, literarily rich and used for formal purposes. L is grammatically simpler and used for informal purposes such as in ordinary conversations (Ferguson, 1959).

According to Ferguson's (1959) original definition:

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 (p. 336; italics in the original).

Although Ferguson (1959) states that diglossia is not restricted to any geographical region or language family, to examine and define the concept of diglossia he chose four speech communities and their languages (Arabic, Greek, Swiss German and Haitian Creole), which fulfilled the criteria of diglossia. Based on his research in these four diglossic cases, Ferguson (1959) states that for a community to be diglossic, it must meet the nine features of function, acquisition, stability, prestige, standardisation, literary heritage, grammar, lexicon, and phonology. First, function is one of the most essential features of diglossia (Ferguson 1959). There is functional distribution

between the H and L varieties; H is appropriate for one set of situations (formal situations such as education, religion, media, and politics) and L for another set of situations (informal situations such as family, friends, and poetry). The distribution of functions does not, however, entail that the two sets of situations never overlap (Ferguson, 1959). Speakers may sometimes use H in situations where L would be required and vice-versa, and for this reason they may be criticised by their interlocutors; in other words, the use of H in an informal activity and the use of L in formal speech is 'an object of ridicule' (Ferguson, 1959, p.329).

Second, in a diglossic situation, L is acquired natively by the speakers of the diglossic community, whereas H is learned by formal education and therefore, 'the speaker is at home in L to a degree he almost never achieves in H' (Ferguson, 1959, p. 331). Ferguson (1959) argues that any change toward full use of the H is unlikely to occur without any change in the pattern of acquisition. Third, diglossia is a rather stable situation as it has been in place for at least several centuries (Ferguson, 1959). Nevertheless, diglossia may result in adopting either the H or the L as the single standard language of the community. For example, if trends appear in the community such as people desiring for more widespread literacy, wider communication among regional and social sections of the community, and for a fully-grown standard national language, then diglossia may result in the adoption of either the H or the L and to a lesser extent, a mixed variety (Ferguson, 1959). According to Ferguson (1959), communicative tensions are created between the H and L varieties which are reduced with the development and use of intermediate forms of language and the borrowing of vocabulary from the H into the L variety.

As for prestige, diglossic speakers often view the H variety as superior to the L variety in several respects (Ferguson, 1959). That is, they often consider that H is in some ways more beautiful, logical or expressive than L (Ferguson, 1959). Regarding standardisation, H varieties have traditionally been described in terms of grammars and dictionaries and have a well-established orthography and pronunciation (Ferguson, 1959). Conversely, L varieties vary extensively in pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, while descriptive and normative studies on L varieties either do not exist or are relatively recent and limited (Ferguson, 1959). With reference to literary heritage, there is usually a significant amount of written work in

H which has been either produced in the history of the community or continues to be produced in another speech community in which H is the standard variety of language (Ferguson, 1959).

There are extensive differences in the grammatical structures of H and L varieties although they are forms of the same language. The grammar of L is normally simpler than the grammar of H, and certain grammatical categories of H are not present in L. With regard to lexicon, most of the vocabulary of H and L is shared with variations in form, use and meaning; technical terms exist only in H, while the popular expressions in L do not exist in H. They are paired items (lexical doublets) with one word in H and the other word in L (Ferguson, 1959). Ferguson (1959) does not provide a general description for the phonology of H and L varieties in diglossia as the phonology systems of the two varieties may be quite similar, quite different, or very different.

Besides its nine defining features, Ferguson (1959) maintains that diglossia may arise when three conditions exist in a speech community: the existence of a large body of literature written in the H variety which represents significant values of the community; literacy in the speech community is restricted to a small elite; an appropriate period of time goes from the establishment of the first two conditions (diglossia takes time to develop). In general, Ferguson's (1959) original concept of diglossia is sharply contrasted with bilingualism as he limits the concept of diglossia to the use of two or more varieties of the same language in a community; he did not intend to examine a situation where distinct languages are used in a community alongside with allocated roles (Ferguson, 1959).

2.2 Fishman's diglossia

Following Ferguson's (1959) original description of a diglossic situation where two or more varieties of the same language are used, the concept of diglossia has been further examined by many scholars who applied the term to describe other linguistic situations. Specifically, Fishman has extended Ferguson's original formulation of diglossia and proposed the following four possible types of relationships between diglossia and bilingualism. For Fishman (1967), bilingualism is the speaker's ability to use more than one language.

a. 'Both diglossia and bilingualism' describes a situation where two linguistic varieties exist in a community, the H and L varieties, which are functionally distributed as in diglossia (Fishman, 1980, pp. 6-7). Fishman (2003) exemplifies this with the linguistic situation of H German and L Swiss German in Switzerland (varieties of the same language), and the linguistic situation in Paraguay of Spanish and Guarani (different languages). Although almost everybody speaks both varieties, the high variety, Spanish, is used in domains such as education, religion and government, while the low variety, Guarani, is used for intimacy and primary group solidarity.

b. 'Diglossia without bilingualism' is a situation where 'two or more speech communities are united religiously, politically or economically into a single functioning unit notwithstanding the socio-cultural cleavages that separate them' (Fishman, 2003, p. 361). In cases such as these, there can be two or more languages or varieties, and one group of speakers control the H, while another group of speakers control the L. An example of this is the pre-World War 1 European elite who used French for their intragroup purposes, whereas the masses spoke a different language. The two groups never interacted with one another and therefore did not form a single speech community and needed translators for their intercommunication (Fishman, 2003). This is contrary to Ferguson's (1959) sense of diglossia as this exists within the same speech community and not between several speech communities as Fishman (2003) argues. 'Both diglossia and bilingualism' and 'diglossia without bilingualism' are quite stable situations (Fishman, 1980) in contrast to the following two situations where diglossia and, consequently, one of its most important features, functional distribution between varieties, is absent.

c. 'Bilingualism without diglossia' is a situation where bilingual speakers use either language for any purpose; there is no compartmentalisation between the language varieties; and therefore, one of these varieties may dominate and replace the other (Fishman, 2003, pp. 363-364). For example, immigrant languages have disappeared as their speakers have adopted the languages of their hosts (Fishman, 1980).

d. ‘Neither bilingualism nor diglossia’ describes a situation where there is only one variety used, thus a monolingual speech community. Fishman (2003, p. 364) maintains that groups like these ‘are easier to hypothesise than to find’.

2.3 Further extensions of the concept

Since Ferguson’s initial description of diglossia and Fishman’s extension of the term, various scholars have suggested different terms for a classification of diglossia, including both Ferguson’s and Fishman’s descriptions. Specifically, Ferguson’s (1959) classical diglossia and Fishman’s (1980) extended diglossia have been respectively termed by Kloss (1966) as ‘in-diglossia’ and ‘out-diglossia’; by Britto (1986) as ‘use-oriented’ (or diatypical) and ‘user-oriented’; by Myers-Scotton (1986) as ‘narrow diglossia’ and ‘broad diglossia’.

Furthermore, Pauwels (1986), who applied the concept of diglossia to an immigrant context in Australia, suggested that a typology of diglossia may clarify and explain the different language behaviour of apparently similar speech communities. Therefore, Pauwels (1986, p. 15) defines diglossia as a language situation where two varieties, H and L, are recognised and used by a speech community, each variety having a role to play in the community and suggests that different sub-categories of diglossia could be established, based on the following criteria:

- i. Size and nature of the speech community showing diglossic features (the speech community could include a state, a region, or an ethnic group).
- ii. Approximate number of speakers acquiring the L as mother tongue and speakers acquiring the H as mother tongue. The term *general diglossia* could be applied when almost everybody in the speech community learns the H later in life and *partial diglossia* when a significant number of speakers acquire the H as a native variety.
- iii. Linguistic and sociolinguistic relationship between the two varieties: if H and L are distinct languages, then this could be viewed as *interlingual diglossia* and if they are varieties of the same language, this could be viewed as *intra-lingual diglossia*.
- iv. Functional relationship between the two varieties: *rigid diglossia* can be used to describe the minimal functional overlapping

between the two varieties, and *fluid diglossia* when several functions are less strictly attached to a particular variety. Rigid and fluid diglossia could be the extreme ends of a continuum with other terms showing in between stages.

It can be seen that Pauwels (1986) sets as criteria for diglossia three important features as initially suggested by Ferguson (acquisition, linguistic distance between varieties and functional distribution), and extends those criteria to fit Fishman’s extension of diglossia by dividing them into clear sub-categories. In this way, a situation of general, intra-lingual, and rigid diglossia can be considered as the strict interpretation of the term described by Ferguson (1959), while a situation of general or partial and inter-lingual or intra-lingual diglossia can be considered as the broad interpretation (of the term) described by Fishman (1967).

Other researchers have suggested new terms similar to diglossia such as Auer (2005), who proposed ‘diaglossia’ or Berruto (1989), who introduced the term ‘dilalia’ to describe the linguistic situation of Italy. This term refers specifically to a situation where H can be used in both formal and informal domains, whereas L has limited functions. Further modifications of the term ‘diglossia’ have been proposed by Saxena (2014) in what he calls ‘critical diglossia’ and ‘lifestyle diglossia’ which describe contemporary diglossic situations. According to Saxena (2014), ‘critical diglossia’ shows the influence of historical and political issues in the construction of diglossia while ‘lifestyle diglossia’ highlights the role of agency in everyday linguistic practices and projection of identity.

3. CRITIQUES ON DIGLOSSIA AND THE CURRENT STATE OF THE THEORY OF DIGLOSSIA

Fishman’s (1980) formulation of diglossia can be regarded as a modification of Ferguson’s (1959) original definition of classical diglossia where two or more related or unrelated linguistic varieties are in a diglossic relationship by allowing the term *diglossia* to describe a situation where the linguistic varieties may be related or unrelated. Hudson (2002a, p. 13) argues that Fishman ‘has implicitly dismissed the degree of structural proximity between codes as irrelevant to the definition of diglossia’. In fact, Fishman (1980) does not attempt to define diglossia but instead extends

diglossia to include varieties which may be genetically unrelated and treats diglossia as one kind of societal multilingualism/bilingualism. In this way, he attempts to incorporate diglossia into the field of multilingualism. Also, in his formulation of diglossia, Fishman (2003) states that diglossia may exist between two or more speech communities, whereas Ferguson (1959) sees diglossia as a situation that exists in a single speech community.

In 'Diglossia revisited', Ferguson (1996, pp. 50-53) acknowledges and clarifies some weaknesses of his original conceptualisations of diglossia. He explains why his original article on diglossia was not intended to be extended or applied to other kinds of sociolinguistic situations such as standard-with-dialects where there are people who learn the standard as a mother tongue and use it in everyday interactions, and stresses that his intention was to describe a particular kind of linguistic situation, that of diglossia, where nobody uses H in ordinary conversation. In addition, Ferguson (1996) admits that he initially failed to establish the degree of linguistic proximity between the two linguistic varieties in a diglossic situation as his intention was to examine two varieties of the same language so that the speakers would always view them as such. In other words, Ferguson (1996) deems that the speakers of H and L would always consider them as the same language and this is why his concept of diglossia should not be extended to cases of unrelated linguistic varieties. Nevertheless, Schiffman agrees with Fishman's extension of diglossia in stating that:

one cannot dismiss Fishman diglossia as being lesser, or different, since in the above-mentioned situations, it may interact equally effectively to condition outcomes, that is, extended diglossia is not 'weaker' or subservient to classical diglossia but rather operates on the same plane, so to speak (2002, p. 143).

In other words, Fishman's diglossia is as valid as classical diglossia since both descriptions function in a similar way.

In his outline of diglossia, Hudson (2002) attempts to distinguish diglossia in the strict sense of the term

(Ferguson's view) from diglossia in the broad sense of the term (Fishman's view) and argues that diglossia should be restricted to Ferguson's term. Hudson (2002a, p. 2) specifically states that diglossia should be distinguished from societal bilingualism (although these are often considered variants of the same phenomenon) because they are 'different in their social origins, evolutionary courses of development, and resolutions over the long term' and that including them under a single rubric obscures sociolinguistic theory. Finally, although Hudson recognises the existence of both related and unrelated language varieties in diglossia, he states that:

if the structural difference between codes in diglossia is viewed as an outcome of the social circumstances giving rise to diglossia in the first place, rather than as a defining feature of diglossia, there is ample reason to suppose that language varieties in diglossia will in fact show a strong statistical tendency to be varieties of the same language (2002a, p. 15).

Nevertheless, Hudson concludes that too much has been made in terms of the degree of structural proximity between constituent varieties in a verbal repertoire as a defining feature of diglossia and that defining diglossia based on whether H and L are related varieties or not is 'an arbitrary gesture and in itself contributes nothing of value to sociolinguistic theory' (2002a, p. 14).

Both Ferguson and Fishman seem to agree on the concept of functional distribution of the language varieties in society (H as a formal spoken/written variety and L as an informal variety). Fishman, however, has been criticised for including unrelated varieties in the concept of diglossia and for considering diglossia mainly as equal to functional distribution of varieties in society. Timm (1981), for instance, points out that as Fishman's extension of diglossia includes unrelated varieties, most of the original criteria of diglossia posited by Ferguson are neglected (such as the shared lexical and phonological features between H and L, the acquisition of L prior to the acquisition of H). In fact, Timm (1981) argues that function, the compartmentalisation of domains, was Fishman's main criterion for diglossia.

Britto (1986, p. 42) also criticises Fishman's loose structural relatedness between varieties, stating that 'Fishman's theory, by imposing no limit on the structural relationship of diglossic codes, permits practically every language community to be called diglossic'. For Winford (1985), equating diglossia with bilingualism is not very useful; specifically, he deems that Ferguson's definition of diglossia has been extended to the degree that the genetic relatedness between the two linguistic varieties is overlooked while the functional distribution of these varieties is considered the most important feature of diglossia. Similarly, Sayahi (2014) argues that for studies on language contact, the concept of classical diglossia is a more useful concept than that of extended diglossia where language varieties are in complementary distribution regardless of their genetic relatedness. Explicitly, Sayahi (2014) explains that when we apply the term 'diglossia' to situations of societal bilingualism where two or more different languages are used, it is more difficult to understand the mechanisms and outcomes of language contact under both diglossia and bilingualism. For instance, the code switching is different, speakers' language attitudes are different, and the type of language change that may take place as a result of the contact between the two varieties can be different (such as language shift in favour of the H or the L variety).

Ferguson's aim in his article on diglossia (in 1959) was that the four defining cases (Arabic, Greek, Swiss German, and Haitian Creole) would lead to a theory of diglossia; his goals were 'clear case, taxonomy, principles, theory' (1996, p. 50). Nevertheless, Hudson (2002a, p. 1) maintains that 40 years after Ferguson's original description of diglossia, 'a coherent and generally accepted theory of diglossia remains to be formulated' as in the years that followed most of the studies were descriptive (examining whether a situation is diglossic or not) rather than constituting approaches to the study of diglossia (Ferguson, 1996, p. 53). Hudson (2002b) stresses that the creation of such a typology is not a simple task as it must be more than just a gathering of case studies of language in society, meaning a theory of language in society. Nevertheless, in his 'Rebuttal essay' on diglossia, Hudson (2002b) accepts both descriptions of diglossia by stating that Ferguson was right in calling attention to the situations of diglossia and Fishman was equally right in requiring that diglossia be within a larger conceptual framework.

4. CONCLUSION

This study discusses the concept of diglossia, its definitions and extensions, and reflects on various critiques the theory of diglossia has received. It suggests that the two prevalent definitions of diglossia were those formulated by Ferguson (1959) and Fishman (1967), on which many case studies on diglossic situations were later based. The main purpose of the paper is to highlight the differences between classical and extended diglossia and explain, through the examination of various critiques, why classical diglossia should not be extended. It concludes by arguing that Ferguson's (1959) concept of classic diglossia should be investigated as a distinct sociolinguistic phenomenon, involving genetically related language varieties and treating the defining features of diglossia as equally important as this would result in the creation of a consistent theory. Nevertheless, this does not imply that Fishman's (1967) view of diglossia (as well as that of other researchers) should not be valued as it contributes to sociolinguistic theory and examines language in society. My aim is to invite sociolinguists to re-evaluate the concept of diglossia and work towards the formulation of a coherent theory of diglossia.

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