

DIGLOSSIA IN A MULTILINGUAL NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

In a multilingual society, there is always the problem of language choice. The study sets to explore the linguistic situations in Nigeria with regards to diglossia. As a multilingual nation, this work seeks to ascertain whether there are definite roles assigned to languages in the linguistically diverse Nigerian society. If yes, what are the pros and cons of such division of labour? Moreover, are there an overlap in the domains the languages occur and are the languages of H-variety and that of L-variety in complementary distribution? The findings revealed that diglossia actually exists in Nigerian linguistic situations, such that the H-variety language being English language tends to be stable in the domains of usage but there are pros and cons associated with assigning functions to languages (diglossia). The methodology adopted is descriptive approach and the theory employed is Sociolinguistic theory which deals with the systematic study of the social uses of language or language use in social context.

Keywords: Diglossia, multilingual, Linguistic situations, complementary distribution, conflict

Introduction

Diglossia is a term propounded by Ferguson (1959) and the original concept was extended by Fishman (1972). According to Ferguson (1959), diglossia is defined as follows:

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 (336).

Here, diglossia simply refers to a situation where two varieties of the same language exist side by side in a speech community; with each variety having a definite role to play. These varieties are classified as High (H) and Low (L). Then, the High variety is used in formal or official domain while the Low variety is used in unofficial and informal domain. Ferguson further speculates that the key defining characteristic of diglossia is that the two varieties are kept quite apart functionally. However, Fishman (1972) views diglossia as a linguistic situation that includes also, the use of unrelated languages as High and Low varieties. Based on Fishman's approach to diglossia, Nigeria, being a multilingual and multicultural nation finds its bearing in this diglossic situation.

Following the colonization of Nigeria by the British Colonial Masters and Missionary activities, English language is adopted as the official language not minding that the language is foreign to the country. English language then stands at diglossic relationship with all the indigenous languages in Nigeria; with English language adopting the High variety and the indigenous

languages, the Low variety. Although, there are varieties of single languages in Nigeria, the study chooses to consider languages and not varieties of a particular language. According to Ethnologue (2017), there are “over 512 native languages spoken in Nigeria”. Presently, it records about 525 native languages. When we consider English language in relation to all these languages, the fact remains that Diglossia exists in Nigerian Speech situation.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to explore the linguistic situations in Nigeria with regards to diglossia.

Research Questions

1. How is Nigerian speech situation diglossic?
2. What are the pros and cons of assigning these roles?
3. Is there an overlap on the domains of language usage?
4. Are the languages in diglossic situations in Nigeria in complementary distribution?

Methodology

The study was largely library-based and depended exclusively on secondary documents. In relating the work, the researchers adopted descriptive approach.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses Sociolinguistic theory propounded by William Labov and Basil Bernstein in (1960s). The theory proposes the descriptive study of the effect of any or all aspects of society, on language and the ways it is used. It is also a methodological and analytical approach to

understanding the relationship between language and its context of use. As the theory is all about language use in social context, it suits the study at hand since the study explores Diglossia in Nigerian Multilingual Society. The context or domains of language use being pivotal to the study of diglossia, and can overlap with assigning functions to language or varieties of a language in a given speech situation. So, the study of language in relation to society is a sociolinguistics affair and requires a sociolinguistics theory.

How is Nigerian Speech Situation Diglossic?

Nigerian speech situation is diglossic because, there are clear cut functions assigned to English language and the indigenous languages in Nigeria, English language operates on formal or official domain; covering administration, governance, education, mass media, politics, commerce, judiciary and so on and is therefore regarded as the High (H) variety. On the other hand, the local or indigenous languages are used for informal conversations with families, friends, servants and low-profile workers. They are also used in folk tales, local dances and in buying and selling in markets and are adopted as the Low (L) variety. In view of Ferguson (2006) rubrics of diglossia – “Function, Prestige, Acquisition, Literary heritage, Stability, Standardization, Grammar, Lexicon and Phonological features”. English language and indigenous Nigerian languages tend to satisfy all these criteria.

Function

English language functions as the High variety while the indigenous languages function as the Low variety. Wardhaugh (1986) in supporting Ferguson (1959) asserts:

A key defining characteristic of diglossia is that the two varieties are united but

kept apart functionally. One is used in one set of circumstances and the other in an entirely different set. For example, the H varieties are used for delivering sermons and formal lectures, especially in a parliament or legislative body, for giving political speeches, for broadcasting the news on radio and television, and for writing poetry, fine literature, and editorials in newspapers. In contrast, the L varieties are used in giving instructions to workers in low- prestige occupations or to household servants, in conversation with familiars, in 'soap operas' and popular programs on the radio, in captions on political cartoons in newspapers, and in 'folk literature'.

So, these postulations of shared functions are true in Nigeria with regards to English language and the indigenous languages.

Prestige

English language being the (H) variety enjoys a greater and superior status than the indigenous languages, being the (L) variety. The respect and recognition English language earns among Nigerians as being special, more intelligible, more logical and more coherent, leaving indigenous languages inferior with little or no respect.

Acquisition

The L-variety is usually acquired naturally by children in the home environment and is used in informal conversations in the home front, just like the indigenous languages in Nigeria. In contrast to this, the H-variety is usually learnt in schools through explicit teaching in a formal setting with

the learner learning it consciously and intentionally, just like the English language in Nigeria. This leads to thousands getting to know more on it than the indigenous languages.

Literacy Heritage

There are more literatures in H-variety, such as textbooks in all fields of study, legal documents, poetry, prose, drama and all official documentations are done in the English language, giving it a high literacy heritage while the indigenous languages do not have enough literatures in all fields of human endeavours and therefore having a low literacy heritage.

Stability

Diglossia is an extremely stable process. In Nigeria for instance, it is incontrovertible that English language has been established as the H-variety and the indigenous languages as the L-variety. So, the stability of diglossia is there.

Standardization

The H-variety is standardized but the L-variety is not standardized. In Nigerian situation, English language is standardized. However; some indigenous languages are standardized but not adequately done when considered with reference to the English language. Meanwhile, great majority of the indigenous languages are not standardized.

Grammar

There are differences in the grammar of the English language (H) and the indigenous languages (L). While the English language has more complex grammar, the indigenous languages have simplified version.

Lexicon

There are words that are found in H-variety that are also in L-variety. However, it is usually the L-variety that borrows from the H-variety. English language as the H-variety has influenced the indigenous languages in Nigeria so much so that there are no ethnic or local languages that have not borrowed from English language.

Phonological Features

Phonologically, English language is quite different in pronunciations and sound system from any of the indigenous languages.

Furthermore, Ejaita (2017) has the following as the characteristic features of Diglossia:

- i. The circumstances under which each variety is used are clearly defined, so there is little mixing between the two.
- ii. The two varieties are clearly separate linguistically, so that at one time, a speaker may be speaking either the H-variety or the L-variety, but never something half-way between the two.
- iii. Everyone can speak the L-variety, and will do so in informal situations, such as with friends and family members; but not everyone can use the H-variety.
- iv. The prestige of speaking the H-variety is higher than that of the L-variety in the society....

In all, it is obvious and indisputable that diglossia actually exists in Nigerian Speech Community and speech situations.

The Pros and Cons of Diglossia in Nigeria

According to Marjan (2020), “Diglossic conditions, situations and its impacts may vary from country to country over different languages for different contexts”. In Nigeria for instance, there are many advantages and disadvantages associated with Diglossia. The following but not limited to these are the pros and cons discovered in Nigerian Speech Community:

The Pros

- It introduces a social language: Diglossia affords a Speech Community with varieties of languages to communicate with. In a multilingual nation like Nigeria, assigning function to languages becomes inevitable. In this, finding a language that will cut across diverse linguistic, ethnic and cultural groups becomes very vital and choosing any of the indigenous languages as the H-variety may create problems because each linguistic group will want their own language to be chosen as the official and/or social language. So, English being a foreign and a second language solves the problem by becoming a unifying factor. Nigerians now use it as their social language and the tension of whose language will be chosen as the official and/or social language then slacked.

- Prestige: Using the H-variety in a diglossia environment affords the users a great and better sense of self-worth. It makes them feel good and confident about knowing varieties of languages. It also boosts a sense of belonging. In Nigeria for instance, although the H-variety is prestigious, The

Yorubas are very proud of their native language not minding its L-variety, unlike some linguistic groups in Nigeria that do not take pride in their local languages.

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• Encourages borrowing: The L- variety borrows greatly from the H-variety and from other L-varieties. In Nigeria for instance, apart from indigenous languages' borrowings from English language, Igbo language as one of the indigenous languages borrows the following according to Nnebedum, T., Onuora N. & Obiakor E. (2018) from Efik, Yoruba, Hausa and Igala languages:

Host Language	Borrowing Language	Lexical Item	English Translation
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Efik	Igbo	Ekpem	Bottle
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Host Language	Borrowing Language	Lexical Items	English Translation
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Yoruba	Igbo	Ọtangele	A kind of cosmetics
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		Akara	Beans cake
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		Ọga	Master
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		Ashawo	A prostitute
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Host Language	Borrowing Language	Lexical Items	English Translation
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Hausa	Igbo	Agidi	A kind of food from corn
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		Dogo	A very tall person
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		Wayo	Fraud
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		Suya	Meat snack
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Host Language	Borrowing Language	Lexical Item	English Translation
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Igala	Igbo	Onuku	A foolish person
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- Correct use of the language of H-variety: As people use the exact rules of grammar in H-variety of Diglossia, it enhances the opportunity to retain the language as claimed by the required rules. With this, maintaining proper acts in a language will help it exist for a long time, especially, the H-variety that is codified and standardized.

- Enhances the understanding and appreciation of two languages and cultures with diglossia, apart from having two languages for community, there is the blending of people with two linguistic and cultural backgrounds; giving rise to a better understanding of the world.

- Encourages language skills: The ability of the speaker to switch appropriately from the H-variety to the L-variety and vice versa, depending on the domain of language use is rather, a useful language skill. Diglossia encourages this kind of code-switching in order to suit the functions assigned to each variety.

The Cons of Diglossia

Diglossia with its benefits has some demerits attached to them. The following are the disadvantages:

- Diglossia threatens the existence of the L-variety languages: Developing all the indigenous languages in Nigeria is rather a difficult task and due to the fact that the H-variety is used for official functions and in education with good codification and standardization, the indigenous languages tend to suffer, because, attention is drawn to strengthening the H-variety at the detriment of the L-variety, as such; some indigenous languages are at the verge of going into extinction and

some have actually died. According to National Council for Arts and Culture (2020), the nine local languages that had become extinct in Nigeria are: Ajawa spoken in present day Bauchi, Basa-Gumna of Niger State, Auyokawa used to be spoken in Jigawa State, Gamo-Ningi, a Kainji dialect in Bauchi State, Homa of Adamawa State, Kubi of Bauchi State, Kpati formerly spoken in Taraba State, Odu used to be spoken in Odukpani area of Cross River State and Teshenawa formerly spoken in Jigawa State. So, diglossia is a threat to the existence of L-variety languages in Nigeria.

- Diglossia introduces discrimination: There is usually a status issue with people using the H-variety. Therefore, in some speech situations, the competent H-variety users tend to look down on the L-variety speakers. The L-variety speakers are seen as illiterates who will remain underestimated. Based on personal observations and using the Igbo language for instance, as a L-variety, you may meet your own ethnic brothers or sisters who are competent users of the H-variety, when you want to initiate a conversation in your local language, you may be ignored or at most they will pretend not to understand Igbo language until you switch to English language. However, the Hausas take pride in seeing people of other ethnic groups speak their language. In business transactions, they can reduce the prices of their commodity for you just because you used their language competently. Nevertheless, they usually see people with the H-variety as the prestigious and educated ones. When an average illiterate Hausa man or woman relates with such people, they will simply tell them – “Ba na jin Turanci” Meaning: “I don’t understand English”.

- Negative impacts on Teaching and Learning: The fact that the students are habituated to the use of L-variety at home, delivering lectures in the H-variety get the students rather confused and the class or course contents are difficult to understand. The problem is not limited to the pupils in the

basic schools or students in the post primary schools but also, undergraduate students in the schools of higher learning. Sometimes, the L-variety tends to interfere in the learning of the H-variety because there has been an existing language in the students' speech repertoire before learning the H-variety in school. Till today, phonological interference seems to be one of the major problems facing learners of English language in Nigeria. In Idemili Local Government area of Anambra State for instance, the pronunciation of the sound /r/ as in 'red' and /l/ as in 'load' are a very big challenge. They tend to pronounce 'red' as 'led' and 'load' as 'road'. Similarly, the Yorubas do omit the sound /h/ in their pronunciation. The word 'house' is pronounced as /avs/ instead of /haus/. The Hausas will replace the sound /f/ with the sound /p/ as in /pipti/ instead of /fifti/ (fifty). Many examples abound on phonological interference but suffice it to end with just these.

Is there an overlap in any of the domains the High and Low languages occur?

There is actually an overlap in the domains the High and Low languages occur. Supporting this view, Alimi (2014) explains that 'the African elites are of the view that their children are better off if they are competent in English and that, it is their early exposure to English only that guarantees the attainment of the desired level of competence' Consequently, instead of leaving the English language to officiate in the official domain, these elites then carry it overboard and use it in family conversations. It is also observed that many educated Nigerians use English to communicate and socialize with friends, colleagues and even family in informal settings; causing an overlap. Moreover, in giving lectures in the Universities for instance, the L-variety languages are sometimes employed in explaining certain concepts in order to drive the lessons home to the students. That's another good example of an overlap in the domains of language use in diglossia situation.

Are the languages in diglossia situations in complementary distribution?

According to Ummnakwe (2017), she asserts:

In Nigeria, English complements the indigenous languages because it facilitates inter-ethnic interaction as well as inter-national communication. In the Nigerian linguistic context, the indigenous languages can neither perform the inter-ethnic or inter-national roles, given their present status. In addition, English is the language of science and technology; the language of the internet and globalization. No indigenous language in Nigeria has been developed to take over these functions. The indigenous languages do not and cannot compete with English in this official domain of language use.

Supporting Ummnakwe (2017), English language is actually, in complementary distribution when considered with the indigenous languages in Nigeria. The linguistic situation in Nigeria still favours English language as the H-variety and its functions in the official domain are quite stable. The indigenous languages on the other hand, also maintain their functions in the informal domain. It is therefore obvious, that functions differ based on the domains of language use; that is actually, the whole essence of Diglossia. Of course, maintaining cultural identity is one of the functions of the indigenous languages; a role which English language can never play. Since English language functions best in the formal/official domain and the indigenous languages in the informal/unofficial domain, that indeed is a clear division of labour! And if this is the case, no doubt, they are in complementary distribution.

Recommendations

The researchers recommend that:

1. There is need to develop the indigenous languages, get them standardized and documented like the English language.
2. People's negative attitude to the Indigenous languages should be corrected, Nigerians should be proud of their local languages.
3. Policy makers on language should make the indigenous languages to be studied to have wider recognition just like the English language.

Conclusion

As a matter of fact, Diglossia exists in Nigerian Speech Community; a linguistic situation that best handled the multilingual nature of the country. Although there may be some disadvantages associated with it, Diglossia has done more good than harm in Nigeria. With Diglossia and wise language policy, the adoption of English language as the H-variety and all the indigenous languages as the L-variety truly helped to avert linguistic and ethnic wars that would have befallen the nation, had any of the indigenous languages chosen as the H-variety over and above other indigenous languages. Diglossia, as a useful linguistic instrument must be upheld.

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