



Diglossia and Code Switching in Nigeria: Implications for English Language Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a sociolinguistic phenomenon, ‘diglossia’ and how it relates to code-switching in bilingual and multilingual societies. It highlights the characteristic features of diglossia by discussing the functions and status of languages or varieties of languages that are involved in diglossic situations. The paper goes on to relate diglossia to the Nigerian situation by highlighting the diglossic situations that exist in Nigeria. Finally, it points out the implications of this sociolinguistic concept for English language teaching and learning in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The act of choosing a language or variety with which to communicate, at any given time is a common feature of bilingual or multilingual societies. In such societies, people are always faced with communicative situations, which demand that they choose an appropriate code with which to express themselves. However, the choices they make are governed by a number of social context and linguistic context factors.

The social context determines to a large extent, the language or variety that one chooses to use. It consists of a number of other factors, such as: the time and place of communication, the formality of the occasion, the topic under discussion, the degree of familiarity between interlocutors and so on. Also, the social characteristics of a person help to determine his choice of language or variety of a language at any given time. These social characteristics are the person’s social class, ethnic group, religious beliefs, values, age and sex to mention but a few.

Code-switching from one language to another is a common feature of a bilingual or multilingual society. Bilinguals and multilingual always find themselves switching from one code to another, either consciously or

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unconsciously. There are many reasons why people code-switch but generally, they do so in response to social context factors.

Description of Diglossia

The word 'diglossia' was derived from a French word 'diglossie' and was brought into English language use by Charles Ferguson in 1959. He described diglossia as a linguistic situation, where two varieties of a language exist side by side in a speech community, with each having a definite role to play. In a diglossic situation, the two varieties of the language are distinct. One of the varieties is the standardized high variety (H) but the other variety is the low variety (L), which may or may not be standardized.

According to Wardhaugh (1998), diglossia is a wide spread phenomenon. It is common in many parts of the world especially, in Greece, Germany, Middle East and Haiti. It has been extended by sociolinguists to include bilingual situations. Trudgill (1983) expressed that, diglossia includes any linguistic situation, where language switching takes place. Wallwork (1978) stated that, diglossia is similar to bilingualism.

Features of a Diglossic Situation

To make a full description of a diglossic situation, Ferguson (1959) carried out an indepth study of four languages: Arabic, Greek, Swiss German and Haitian Creole. He categorized each of these languages into two varieties: high (H) and low (L). The distinct features of these varieties are discussed under the subheadings outlined below:

- i) Function
- ii) Prestige
- iii) Acquisition
- iv) Standardization

Function: The most important feature of diglossia is the specialization of the functions of the two varieties. In some communicative situations, only the high variety (H) is appropriate but in other situations only the low variety (L) is used, for example:

S/N	High Variety (H)	Low Variety (L)
1	Sermons in churches	Informal conversation
2	Formal letters	Instruction to servants
3	Political speeches	Folk literature
4	Lectures	Buying and selling in the market
5	News broadcasts	Radio soap opera

Prestige: The high variety (H) enjoys a greater status than the low variety (L). It is believed that the 'H' is more intelligible more coherent, and more logical than 'L'

Acquisition: The low variety (L) is usually acquired naturally by the child in his home environment but the high variety (H) is acquired through explicit teaching in a formal setting.

Standardization: The high variety (H) is standardized but the low variety is not standardized but in some communities a standardized 'L' may arise as a result of imitation of the dialect by speakers of other dialects. When this happens the function of the low variety still remains limited to that of 'L'.

Code-Switching in Diglossic Situations

Gal (1988), described code-switching as a conversational strategy used to establish relationships. It can also be used to cross or destroy group boundaries. In the diglossic situations described by Ferguson (1959), it is normal for people to switch from one variety to another unconsciously. For instance an interviewer on a Greek television will introduce a guest and conduct the opening pleasantries in high variety (H) but gradually slips over to the low variety (L) as the interview progresses. It is also a typical behaviour for people to read aloud from a newspaper written in 'H' or listen to a formal speech in 'H' and then proceed to discuss the issues in 'L'. Also, it is important that the right variety be used in the right situations. Using the low variety (L) in a formal situation is not socially accepted because it makes one an object of ridicule. Similarly, using a high variety (H) in an informal situation is felt to be unnatural or pedantic.

Diglossic Situations in Nigeria

There are a number of linguistic situations in Nigeria that reflect the features of diglossia. In these situations, speakers code-switch from one language to another or one variety to another. These diglossic situations are outlined below:

- a) Code-switching from Standard English to non-standard English
- b) Code-switching from English to Pidgin
- c) Code-switching from English to a local language
- d) Code-switching from a local language to its variety

Code-switching Standard English to Non-Standard English

Standard English in Nigeria refers to the British English introduced in Nigeria by the European missionaries and colonial administrators. Nigerians, who acquired western education, speak Standard English. It is the official language variety for administration, governance, mass media, politics, and commerce and so on. Non-standard English on the other hand, is the variety that is spoken by Nigerians, who are not well-educated. Below is an example of the two varieties:

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| i) | John and I are brothers. | (standard English) |
| ii) | John and I am brother. | (non-standard English) |
| iii) | I want to eat. | (standard English) |
| iv) | I want to chop. | (non-standard English) |

When there is code-switching from Standard English to non-standard English, the former becomes the high variety (H) while the latter becomes the low variety (L): In terms of prestige, Standard English enjoys greater prestige.

Code-switching from English to Pidgin

It is common practice for educated Nigerians, who dwell in cities like Lagos, Benin, Port Harcourt and Warri to code-switch from English to Pidgin, when communicating with people especially in informal situations. This practice is also very common among universities undergraduates in most Nigerian Universities and Colleges. Switching from English to Pidgin is also a common feature of the Police and Army Barracks in Nigeria.

In this case, English assumes the status of the high variety (H), while pidgin becomes the low variety (L). English enjoys greater prestige than pidgin.

Code-switching from English to a Local Language

Nigeria as a multilingual country has over 400 indigenous languages, three of which are regional languages, (Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba). In varied situations of daily living educated Nigerians code-switch from English to their local languages and vice versa. They do this, in response to the communicative situations they find themselves in.

The situation being described here is bilingualism. Many Nigerians use English and their local languages interchangeably. This situation is made possible because many Nigerians are literate in English. In this diglossic situation, English assumes the role of the high variety (H), while the local language assumes the role of the low variety (L).

Code-switching from a Local Language to its Variety

Many Nigerian languages have two or more varieties, one of which is standardized. So, code-switching can take place between a local language and its variety. For instance, an Igbo speaking person from Ebonyi State can speak standard Igbo to people from Imo and Anambra States but speaks his own dialect to someone from his own speech community. The standard variety of the local language becomes the high variety (H) while the other variety becomes the low variety (L), but their functions are not strictly defined.

Implications of Diglossia And Code-Switching For English Language Teaching And Learning.

The concept of diglossia and code-switching has serious implications for English language teaching and learning in Nigeria. First and foremost, diglossia emphasizes the importance of matching the right variety with the appropriate situation. This is also important in English language learning. Learners should be taught to use formal language in formal situations and informal language in informal situations. A child should learn how to greet people in the village in his local language and not in English.

Second, it has been observed that code-switching occurs frequently and unconsciously in diglossic situations. Therefore, English language teachers should emphasize that learners learn to keep to one particular code at a time instead of mixing them up. This is pertinent because many Nigerian undergraduates find it difficult to speak English accurately without mixing their sentences with pidgin.

In addition, the concept of diglossia and code-switching relates mainly to oral communication. Therefore, English language teachers should give more attention to oral communication in the classroom. The emphasis should be on teaching English as it is used for communication in natural situations of daily living, for different purposes and functions. They should provide learners with learning activities that reflect real-life experiences. Also learners should be given opportunities to practice the linguistic forms and structures they learn in the classroom, as they are actually used in real-life situations.

CONCLUSION

Diglossia is a common phenomenon in the world today but many people are not conscious of it. In a bilingual society, where few people are exposed to literacy or western education, diglossia is bound to occur. Nigeria as a multilingual society, has varied diglossic situations. In all these situations, people code-switch from one language or variety to another either consciously or unconsciously. It is important that Nigerians become aware of the diglossic situations, so that they can always use the right language or variety in the appropriate situation. English language teachers on their part, should emphasize appropriacy of form and function.

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