

Diglossia

(La diglossie)

There is a need to clarify the precise meaning of what is traditionally called diglossia since it is a term that is frequently returned to in this text due to the fact that many creoles must be characterised as functioning alternately with another (generally European) language according to certain rules (which are open to change).

One of the first to have systematically developed and defined diglossia was Ferguson in a famous article, 'Diglossia',¹ which appeared in the *Word* journal in 1959, in which he endeavoured to define this type of language contact through four distinct situations:

- Greece: the alternation of Katharevusa and Demotic
- Switzerland: the alternation of Swiss German and German
- Arabic-speaking countries: the coexistence of literary and dialectal Arabic
- Haiti: the alternation of Creole and French

Since the first definitions from Ferguson were reviewed and amended by Fishman (1971) and subsequently by many other sociolinguists over the years, we will avoid the extraneous question of whether diglossia implies that the high (H) and low (L) languages are inevitably related (Ferguson spoke of two varieties of one language). It will be quite clear that Ferguson's analyses, which were perhaps valid in 1959, are often no longer a true description of the relationships between the languages he described. Demotic has now completely prevailed over Katharevusa and Haitian Creole is no longer restricted to the situations assigned it by Ferguson, having progressively taken over many areas of expression. Furthermore, it is questionable whether the concept of diglossia is still actually relevant in Haiti given that approximately 90% of the population are monolingual Creole speakers while only a fringe minority of the population is actually diglossic (or possibly even bilingual).

Clearly, taking Ferguson's 1959 descriptions of Haitian Creole usage relative to French as the starting point measured against the description that might be given of them today could give the impression that there has been a major evolution. It is even possible to express some doubts as to the soundness of Ferguson's description or, more precisely, to the population sample used for this description. Examining the correlation between French and Creole, Ferguson describes the status of these two languages in Haiti in the following grid:

¹ Ferguson's famous article has been republished in particular in two works which are quite readily accessible: Dell Hymes, *Language in Culture and Society* ([n.p.]: Harper, 1964), pp. 429-39 and Pier Paolo Giglioli, *Language and Social Context* ([n.p.]: Penguin Modern Sociology Readings, 1983), pp. 232-51.

	H	L
Sermon in church or mosque	x	
Instructions to servants, waiters, workmen, clerks		x
Personal letter	x	
Speech in parliament, political speech	x	
University lecture	x	
Conversation with family, friends, colleagues		x
News broadcast	x	
Radio “soap opera”		x
Newspaper editorial, news story, caption on picture	x	
Caption on political cartoon		x
Poetry	x	
Folk literature		x

Table 8.1 Ferguson’s 1959 illustration of the status of French and Creole in Haiti²

This distribution is well known and has been discussed many times. Even if it is accepted that the position attributed to French thirty years ago undoubtedly corresponded to the more visible Haitian reality, it is also possible to find elements that show that this situation was already on the move and this is confirmed by accounts and documents that can be gathered today which reveal a significant evolution.

Although the general tendency is to turn to French in formal situations and to creole (which appears in different varieties according to the social class of the speaker) in more informal situations, there are many usages that cannot be ignored which conjure up a more complex³ representation showing clearly that diglossia is not typical for everyone, both because there are speakers who are actually monolingual, although their numbers are decreasing in Martinique and Guadeloupe, and because there are people who are likely to use either Creole or French in the same situation and who are therefore moving towards true bilingualism.

There is no doubt that there is a ‘français populaire’ in the Antilles but there is also an acrolectal, or distinguished, creole and it would be wrong to see creole only as the basilect and French as the high language. This classical outline of diglossia has had its day and is certainly to be substantially reviewed for the Lesser Antilles.

Superposing creole and French simultaneously on the Antilles, it is clear that both are subject to geographical as well as sociological variation. The lects of rural speakers are not the same as those of urban speakers and the lects of speakers of high social status, such as doctors or lawyers, are not the same as those who work, for example, as heavy vehicle drivers on building sites, even though they may be from the same town. It should be emphasised that, even among the working classes, French is not restricted to administrative and formal usages but is also a widely used second language. While this informal French, which again varies according to social class, may not be the same as that spoken in Paris or Lyon (but then neither is the informal French spoken in Paris the same as it is in Lyon), there is no denying that there is an Antillean ‘français populaire’ whose features are yet to be systematically

² C. A. Ferguson, ‘Diglossia’, *Word*, 15 (1959), 324-40 (p. 329).

³ M. C. Hazaël-Massieux speaks of a double continuum in ‘Continuum’ ([link: ‘Continuum’ <http://creoles.free.fr/Cours/anglais/Continuum.pdf>](http://creoles.free.fr/Cours/anglais/Continuum.pdf)).

described. The literary French forged by such authors as Chamoiseau and Confiant is also quite obviously not the French that is used spontaneously by speakers even if it has been inspired by this 'français populaire' on occasions.

Summary

Diglossia is a term used to classify communication situations in societies that make complementary use in daily exchanges of two distinct codes which are either two language varieties or two languages. Certain circumstances imply the use of one of the codes, language A, to the exclusion of the other, language B, which can only be used in situations from which the first language is excluded. This definition comprises many variations, however. Although there are diglossic situations in a way in the majority of societies, for example in Britain, there is a contrast between the English used in exchanges between friends or while shopping and that used in university lectures or at public conferences, it must be emphasized that the preferred use of this term is in reference to societies in which the contrast is particularly marked and often backed up by the recourse to two distinct reference terms for the varieties in use (for example, standard language/patois, Katharevusa/Demotic in Greece, and French/creole in the majority of French creole-speaking areas). Generally, these diglossic situations are situations of language conflict whereby one of the languages is termed the 'high' variety in contrast to the other which is considered 'low' with the former being used in communication situations considered 'noble' (writing, formal usage, and so on) and the latter being used in more informal circumstances (conversations with close family etc.). Speakers have sometimes been known to question whether this second variety is, in fact, a real language.