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A Case Review of Tamil Diglossia

Alfred J. Matiki, Ph.D.

Introduction

Since Ferguson published his famous paper on diglossia in 1959, a lot of scholars have tried to follow this scholarship by matching a lot of language situations against the principles of diglossia that he laid out. While such scholarship has uncovered numerous other cases of diglossia (dead or alive) in the world, in some cases the principles have been applied to situations and in ways that the original theory did not intend.

Hudson (1994) rightly notes that the term *diglossia* has acquired a certain degree of ambiguity because of the way it has been used (and misused) by various scholars.

Ferguson (1991) also admits that his theory has probably been misunderstood and, in some cases, the terminology that guided the theory has been extended to cover areas that were not and probably are not in cognizance with the original theory. Ferguson also admits certain weaknesses in his theory.

In the original article, Ferguson (1959:336) defined diglossia as

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.

It is clear that this definition is a little too inclusive and no hierarchy of the defining principles of diglossia is evident. It is not clear also as to how many of the nine features should apply for a language situation to qualify as diglossic. As a result of these shortcomings, some scholars have zealously applied these principles and diglossified situations that could appropriately be analyzed within the framework of colonial language situations or bilingualism. For instance, Fishman (1977) looks at the relationship between English (or French) and various vernaculars in post colonial areas as constituting diglossic situations.

Recent Work on Diglossia

Recent work on diglossia (see Hudson 1991, Hudson-Edwards 1984, Schiffman 1991, Britto 1991, Ferguson 1991, Walters 1996) has, however, shed more light on the major principles of diglossia.

The two most important defining principles of diglossia are function and acquisition. The other principles - prestige, standardization, stability, grammar, lexicon, and phonology - are only significant to the extent that they help in describing and comparing diglossias (Britto 1991).

In a true diglossic situation, therefore, the two codes will be complementary in their functions with the superposed code (H) being utilized in situations that can easily be characterized as formal while the *underposed* code (L) is used in non formal contexts. In terms of acquisition, the H code is learned through formal means of instruction while the L code is acquired naturally as an L1; the H code does not have native speakers while the L has.

This paper will attempt, therefore, to apply the principles of diglossia outlined above to the case of Tamil. It is important, however, to ground Tamil diglossia within the linguistic culture of South Asia since this geographical area appears to be very rich in diglossias (see Hudson 1994).

Linguistic Culture of South Asia

It is a well known fact that South Asia is linguistically diverse and complex. The culture of South Asia, as Schiffman (1996) points out, has been preoccupied with language matters for a long time. Conceptions about the origin, nature, purpose, and power of language are deep-rooted in the Indic culture. One of the major concerns in the ancient linguistic culture of this region was the preservation of sacred texts and the purity of the language in which these texts were composed. As a result of these concerns, the culture distinguished between pure, sacred language and language for common use. These attitudes about high and low language were

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evident from the earliest times.

This concern for the purity and preservation of language, in part, explains why languages like Sanskrit and Tamil were codified in grammars way back around 500 BCE. It is very likely, therefore, that Tamil diglossia was rooted in this concern for the purity of language.

The Codes in Tamil Diglossia

The literature on Tamil diglossia shows that Tamil has numerous varieties which, in turn, have yielded various forms of diglossic situations or what Schiffman (1996:197) refers to as ‘severe diglossia in Tamil.’ It is obvious that in many cases a single variety is known by several different labels and this contributes to the confusion one finds in the literature on Tamil diglossia. For instance, such labels as Cen Tamil, Literary Tamil, Classical Tamil, probably refer to the same variety. Other varieties include Pandit Tamil, Modern Tamil, Substandard Colloquial Tamil, Standard Colloquial Tamil, Kotun Tamil, Formal Tamil, and so on. Schiffman (1996) is probably right in describing Tamil linguistic culture as multiglossic.

Diasystem

Britto’s (1991) concept of diasystem (a system of varieties), however, is surely a better way of reducing the confusion highlighted above. While Ferguson saw a diasystem only in the L domain, Britto extends this to the H domain. Each of these diasystems is basically a continuum of suboptimally related varieties. A variety qualifies into a diasystem on the basis of the two principle features of diglossia outlined above. Varieties which are acquisitionally and functionally superposed constitute the H diasystem (or simply Tamil H) while the other varieties form the L diasystem (Tamil L).

Function

As noted above, one of the most important defining features of diglossia is the functional complementarity of the two codes. As Ferguson postulated, the H code is appropriate and used in one set of situations while the L code is appropriate and used in another. The two codes may also overlap in a few situations.

Tamil diglossia exhibits this functional complementarity of codes. While the L codes are used in all day-to-day situations, the H codes are used in more formal situations. With respect to the H diasystem, the degree of formality of a situation determines the variety in the H continuum which will be used in that situation. For instance, Cen Tamil, which is on the higher rungs of the H diasystem, is the preferred code in the more formal situations such as religion and education. The other varieties of Tamil H such as Popular H, which are less rigid than Cen Tamil or Literary H, are used in less formal contexts such as newspapers, the radio, television, prose fiction and so on.

The use of Popular H in less formal situations probably explains why it is the most widely used variety of Tamil H. The fact that it is less rigid, simpler than Cen Tamil and that it is close to the L diasystem means that it is accessible to many people. Its use, nonetheless, is restricted to formal situations. Occasionally, it may surface in an L environment for the sake of effect.

Acquisition

All the evidence in the literature indicates that the acquisition of Tamil is invariably in keeping with Ferguson's description. Tamil H is learned in school and through other formal means of instruction while Tamil L is acquired naturally as one's first language (L1). The classical loop feedback between function and acquisition is evident here. The H code cannot be acquired as anybody's native language because it has no native speakers from whom one can acquire it.

Prestige

Ferguson indicated that speakers hold the H code in high esteem compared to the L codes and that in some cases speakers deny ever using the L codes because of the stigma that they carry. In Tamil diglossia, only Cen Tamil is regarded as more prestigious than the other H varieties and the L varieties. The reverence for Cen Tamil, as shown above, is firmly grounded in religion and the desire to keep the code pure. An appropriate infrastructure that oversees the purity and preservation of Cen Tamil has been in place for centuries and includes priests and Tamil grammarians.

Stability

The brief historical background of the linguistic culture of South Asia provided above seems to show that Tamil diglossia has existed for centuries. The emergency of such codes as Popular H and Standard Colloquial Tamil is probably a resolution of the normal communicative tensions that arise in diglossic situations.

In terms of a literary tradition, there is ample evidence that a sizable body of literature has existed, particularly in Cen Tamil, from the earliest stages of the diglossic situation. The (re)discovery of ancient Tamil literature by such Tamil scholars as U.Ve.Cuvaminataiyar established the existence of a vibrant literary heritage of pre-Aryan Tamil culture. The development of the Pure Tamil Movement was motivated mostly by this discovery.

It is very likely that the diglossic situation in Tamil Nadu (Tamilnadu) will persist for a long time because of the symbolic values that Tamil H and Tamil L have (Britto 1991). Another reason for the maintenance of Tamil diglossia is that the current Tamil orthography is only appropriate for representing Tamil H. Unless there are deliberate attempts to alter the status of Tamil H, it is very unlikely that the diglossic situation in Tamil Nadu will end soon.

It should be noted, however, that the maintenance of Tamil diglossia does not necessarily mean

that there will not be any changes, particularly in the domains in which each code is used. Schiffman (1996), for instance, shows that political speeches were once restricted to Tamil H.

Note that Schiffman (1996:198) uses Fishman's (1980:4) taxonomy of diglossia and classifies Tamil diglossia into classical H and vernacular L. Schiffman is aware, however, of the "range of styles of Tamil that is in use in various domains, from the classical through modern literary to educated spoken, regional spoken dialects, and non-standard colloquial dialects." Presently, however, these speeches are for the most part delivered in Tamil L. The domain shifts are likely to occur from Popular H to Standard Colloquial Tamil since this H variety is not strictly policed by the grammarians and more importantly because it is the closest to the L diasystem. The stability between Cen Tamil and Tamil L is, however, likely to persist.

Other Features of Tamil Diglossia

There is documented evidence that Tamil H is distinguishable from Tamil L at both the phonological and morphological levels. All Tamil words are pronounced differently in H and L diasystems with very few exceptions. The differences are caused by a number of phonological processes in the L and include nasalization, monophthongization, vowel lowering, assimilation, and lateral deletion.

At the morphological level, a number of morphemes such as quotative particles, conditional clause markers, and perfective aspect suffixes appear in Tamil L as bound forms and in H as free forms. These differences are noted when H and L are compared and contrasted as diasystems. It is very likely that there would be more differences if Cen Tamil, as an isolated variety of the H diasystem, is compared and contrasted with the other H varieties and the L diasystem.

The lexicon of the two codes, H and L, does not show the kind of lexical variations that Ferguson noted in his defining diglossic situations. Ferguson (1959:334) noted, for example, that in many diglossic situations there are "many paired items, one H one L, referring to fairly common concepts frequently used in both H and L." There is no adequate evidence in Tamil diglossia for the existence of such lexemes. The lexicon, as noted earlier is not one of the most important distinguishing features of a diglossic situation. Lack of evidence for paired lexical items in Tamil diglossia does not, therefore, detract the legitimacy of this particular diglossia.

Conclusion

It seems quite reasonable to conclude that Tamil is one of the clear examples of diglossia. Although scholarship in this diglossic situation seems to have created a labyrinth of crisscrossing diglossias, the concept of diasystem seems to distinguish clearly between Tamil H and Tamil L. It has been noted that Tamil diglossia has existed for centuries and that there is no evidence of an imminent challenge to this stable situation.

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