



What are the linguistic consequences of living in a multilingual society?

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Abstract

There are several multilingual countries in the world where certain linguistic changes take place due to the fact that people in these countries speak more than one language. The changes result in the creation of domain in which people speak specific languages. The use of different languages in different domains results in the creation of a diglossic situation. In a diglossic situation, code switching and code mixing takes places involving the various languages that are used in the situation. However there is a flip side of having a multilingual society because certain languages can be wiped out because they cannot compete with other languages, which are introduced in a multilingual society. Thus when people cease to use a language, it becomes extinct, resulting in language death. Furthermore at an early stage when two or more languages come in contact with each other, we see the emergence of Pidgins and Creoles. Hence the paper analysis the aforementioned changes like code switching, code mixing, language death, Pidgins and Creoles that take place with the emergence of a multilingual speech community in a society.

Keywords: Diglossia, Multilingual Society

1. Introduction

All over the world, people use language to share their thoughts and feelings with other people and in turn form a social rapport with each other. But in many countries people speak several languages and therefore they have to choose a particular language in order to interact with different people. There are many countries in Africa and Asia which have hundreds of languages within their borders. It is not the case that most of such countries have one main language which is spoken by everyone and there are several other languages spoken by small number of tribes or communities. Actually, most of these languages have substantial number of speakers even though the area where the language is spoken may be small. In India, there are 14 languages

recognised by the constitution. Similarly in the Philippines there are 6 major regional languages whereas in Nigeria there are three languages. Thus all these countries have multilingual societies where people speak more than one language. Due to the development of a multilingual society, certain linguistic changes take place in it. These linguistic changes are the consequences of multilingualism which generally leads to the diglossic division of societal domains where each domain is dominated by two languages, the mother tongue and the other tongue. This kind of diglossic relationship between two languages often results in code switching and code mixing. Multilingualism in a nation or society can also result in the extinction of a particular local language. This process of extinction is popularly called Language Death. Finally, at an early stage when two or more languages come in contact with each other, we see the emergence of Pidgins and Creoles.

Diglossia is a term coined by Ferguson. According to Ferguson in *Word*, Diglossia means the existence of two varieties of a language which are allotted two different social functions. In 1972, Joshua Fishman in *The Society of Language*, modified the definition of Diglossia by including two different languages instead of varieties, these languages are meant to be used in two different societal domains. We should also keep in mind that diglossia is different from multilingualism/bilingualism. Multilingualism is the individual's ability to use more than one or two languages. On the other hand diglossia means that a person uses two different languages but the two languages are meant to be used in two different societal domains. For example friends, family, education, religion, occupation can be regarded as domains. Thus it is the domain which dictates the language to be used. The domains where we have to use our mother tongues or Low languages are normally regarded as informal domains. An informal domain can be friends, family, relatives and so on. In a formal domain like office, administration or university, the other tongue is used. The other tongue is generally regarded to be the High language. The High language is mainly associated with power and economic well being. The High language is mainly spoken by the politically strong, well educated and economically well off sections of the society. Thus those people who cannot master the High language are often socially marginalised.

An example of diglossia can be found in Paraguay. This example has been closely analysed by Rubin in *National Bilingualism in Paraguay*. Spanish and Guarani are the two main languages used in Paraguay. Due to its long isolation from Spain and the dwindling numbers of Spanish speakers, Guarani has become very popular in the country and it has become the mother tongue of about 90% of the people. Thus Guarani is recognised as the national language of Paraguay. But Spanish is still used by the government and is the medium of instruction at institutions of higher education. In the capital city, Asuncion, most of the people can speak both Spanish and Guarani. But Guarani is widely spoken in the villages. Spanish is generally used on formal occasions like in government offices, during business meetings, with foreigners or well dressed strangers. Thus Spanish is the language to be used in the formal domains. But Guarani is used on informal occasions; it is generally used with relatives, friends, and servants and with strangers who are not well dressed. Thus Guarani is used in informal domains. (Therefore a diglossic relationship exists between the two languages and they operate in two different sets of societal domains.

Another consequence of multilingualism is code switching and code mixing. Kachru in *Indianisation of English* (1983) explains that code-switching is the ability to switch from code A

to code B. According to Fasold, “code mixing means using pieces of one language while a speaker is using another language”¹. The language pieces taken from another language are words, phrases or larger units. There are two types of code switching, situational code switching and metaphorical code switching. In situational code switching, the languages are used according to the situation in which the conversant finds himself or herself. They speak one language in one situation and another in a different one. Metaphorical code switching takes place when there is a change of topic. But some topics can be discussed in either code/language but the choice of the language adds a distinct flavour to the conversation on a topic. Thus the choice of codes is generally based on social values.

Situational code switching is very easy to identify because one language is used in a particular situation while the other is used in a different one. But metaphorical code switching has an affective dimension to it; you change the code as you redefine the situation—formal to informal, official to personal, serious to humorous. Wardhaugh quoting Gumperz in the *Introduction to Sociolinguistics* cites examples of metaphorical code switching from three sets of languages, Hindi-English, Slovenian-German, and Spanish-English. What happens in each case is that the mother tongue expresses ‘we-type’ solidarity among the participants and is therefore used for informal activities. On the other hand the other tongue has a ‘they type’ orientation and is therefore used for formal activities. But this ‘we-they’ distinction is not absolute and therefore certain topics may be discussed in either code.

Multilingualism can also lead to the extinction of a particular language. This means that there is no one left who speaks the particular language. In linguistic parlance this process of extinction is called Language Death. Language Death can only occur in a bilingual or multilingual society. In a bilingual/multilingual society people speak more than one language. But these people seldom give up speaking a particular language within their lifetime. This means that a language takes generations to become extinct. If a particular generation is bilingual or multilingual then due to it may only pass one language to the new generation. Thus the language spoken by the earlier generation dies because it is no longer in use by the new generation and the speakers of the language who belonged to the earlier generation may have perished.

According to Crystal in *Language Death*, language death takes place in urban centers as compared to rural areas because there is dominance of a particular culture over the indigenous culture. Therefore Crystal identifies three stages leading to language death. In the first stage there is immense pressure upon the people, especially those living in cities to speak the language of the dominant culture, i.e., the dominant language. This pressure is due to the importance accorded to the dominant language by the government through the implementation of certain laws and recommendations favouring the language. Similarly the dominant language may become very popular among the people, especially the younger generation. There may be particular incentives connected with the speaking of the dominant language like people may get better jobs if they speak this language. Thus due to all these reasons people are forced to learn and speak the dominant language. There is an emergence of bilingualism or multilingualism in the second stage. The people become fluent in the dominant language but they also speak the old, indigenous language. But the importance and influence of the old language gradually starts declining and the people start using the dominant language. In the third stage the process of the old language’ extinction starts. The younger generation only uses the dominant language whereas the use of the old language is discarded by them. The older generation is ashamed to use

the old language; due to this the new younger generation only uses the dominant language because their parents discourage them to use the old language. Thus slowly the speakers of the old language start diminishing and a time comes when there is no speaker of the language left. With no speaker left to speak it, the language dies. Crystal says, "Within a generation sometimes within a decade a healthy bilingualism within a family can slip into a self-conscious semilingualism. And hence into monolingualism which places that language one step nearer to extinction"².

Multilingualism also results in the development of pidgins and creoles. A pidgin is not a native language of a particular group of people. It is actually a language developed to serve the interests of a group of people. People who wish to communicate with the speakers of a different language need to establish or improvise a code so that they are able to communicate. Thus it is only after coming in contact with the speakers of a different language that the process of 'pidginisation' takes place. This means that a pidgin is actually a contact language. The process of pidginisation requires at least three languages one language will always be dominant over the other two. If there are two languages then there will be a struggle of dominance. The speakers of the other two 'inferior' languages will try to develop a pidgin so that they can communicate with the speaker of the dominant language and also with each other. Thus the process of pidginisation takes place in a multilingual society and not in a bilingual one. In order to develop a pidgin, the speakers of the inferior language have to simplify the dominant language so that he or she can understand it. By doing so they may also incorporate several terms from their own language in the simplified dominant language. Pidgins flourished in places where slavery existed and slaves were drawn from several countries. These slaves had to develop a code in order to communicate with each other and with the foreigner colonists. This is the reason why Pidgins developed in the Caribbean countries colonised by the British and South East Asian colonies like Malaya and Dutch East Indies. Pidgins also developed in countries lying on the sea coast because foreign trade took place in these coastal countries. Due to foreign trade people in these areas come in contact with foreigners. Thus in order to communicate with the foreigners, these coastal people derive a simplified code from the language spoken by the foreigners. This simplified code is actually a pidgin. A creole is actually a pidgin that has become the first language of a new generation of speakers. A creole is a normal language in every sense although it is derived from a pidgin. New linguistic features may emerge in a creole. Some of the well-known creoles are the Haitian Creole and the Hawaiian Creole. These creoles have the same grammatical characteristics as other languages, although they show many characteristics of the pidgin from which they have been derived.

As seen in the above paragraphs, there are several consequences of multilingualism. In some countries diglossia has developed as a result of multilingualism whereas in some countries language death has occurred due to multilingualism. In coastal areas pidgins and creoles have developed. Thus not only multilingualism but even the political, geographical and cultural conditions of a country or region play an important role in promoting the varied consequences of multilingualism.

End Notes

- (1) Ralph Fasold, *The Sociolinguistics of Society* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1984), p.180.
- (2) David Crystal, *Language Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 79.

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