

DIGLOSSIA?

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DIGLOSSIA

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1. Core Definition

Diglossia refers to a specific, relatively stable sociolinguistic situation where two distinct varieties of the same language, or sometimes two entirely different languages, coexist within a single speech community. This coexistence is characterized by a strict functional separation: each variety is reserved for specific social contexts and purposes. One variety, traditionally termed the **High (H) variety**, is accorded superior status and prestige, typically utilized exclusively in formal domains such as government, education, literature, formal media, and religious practice. Conversely, the second variety, known as the **Low (L) variety**, lacks official prestige, is acquired naturally as the mother tongue, and is confined primarily to informal communication, daily life, home interactions, and colloquial speech. The strict functional compartmentalization, coupled with a societal valuation that privileges the H variety, is the defining feature distinguishing diglossia from simple bilingualism.

The core distinction, as noted in the foundational understanding of the concept, is that the L variety is used extensively ("a lot") for spontaneous interaction, while the H variety is used "less" frequently but holds institutional authority and formality. The H variety is usually older, highly standardized, and grammatically codified, requiring formal instruction for mastery. By contrast, the L variety is typically characterized by greater regional variation, a simplified morphology, and is the spontaneous vehicle for everyday thought and emotion. Speakers inherently recognize and adhere to this division; using the L variety in a formal H domain is often considered a sign of disrespect or illiteracy, while employing the H variety in a casual L setting can sound unnatural or pedantic.

This structural separation ensures that the two varieties are complementary rather than competing. The H variety provides the community with a standardized tool for written communication, connection to historical literature, and symbolic unity across regions. The L variety serves the indispensable function of facilitating intimate, spontaneous, and unmonitored interaction, ensuring linguistic cohesion at the grassroots level. The stability of a diglossic situation relies heavily on the maintenance of this functional specialization, which is typically reinforced by institutional support, including educational systems, legislative bodies, and state-controlled media, all of which prioritize the H form.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term **diglossia** (from the Greek *diglossos*, meaning "two-tongued") was first used in a linguistic context by Ioannis Psycharis in the late 19th century to describe the complex linguistic

situation in Greece, involving the highly formalized Katharevousa (H) and the colloquial Demotic (L). However, the concept was formally introduced and standardized into modern sociolinguistics through the seminal work of American linguist Charles A. Ferguson. His highly influential 1959 paper, "Diglossia," provided the framework and criteria that scholars still use today to identify and analyze these unique linguistic environments.

Ferguson's original definition of diglossia was restrictive, applying only to situations where the H and L varieties were genetically related dialects of the same language. He detailed four classic cases: Standard German/Swiss German in Switzerland, Classical Arabic/regional vernaculars, Haitian Creole/French, and Katharevousa/Demotic Greek. Key to Ferguson's framework was the notion that the H variety was a "superposed" form--learned through formal education, highly codified, and possessing a more complex grammar--which no native speaker used for ordinary, unmonitored conversation. This narrow focus emphasized the structural divergence and the psychological sense among speakers that the L variety was merely a corrupted or inferior version of the highly esteemed H form.

The scope of the term was significantly broadened in 1967 by sociologist Joshua Fishman. Recognizing the explanatory power of Ferguson's functional separation, Fishman argued that the concept should apply even when the functionally separated varieties were entirely distinct languages, often unrelated genetically. This expansion allowed the application of diglossia to situations involving languages like Spanish and Guarani in Paraguay, or French and indigenous languages in post-colonial settings. Fishman's reformulation, often summarized as "bilingualism and diglossia," shifted the focus from the genetic relationship of the varieties to the crucial element of societal functional specialization, greatly increasing the term's utility in modern sociolinguistic analysis of multilingual nations.

3. Key Characteristics: High (H) and Low (L) Varieties

Ferguson's original model identified nine specific traits that consistently differentiate the H and L varieties. Functionally, the allocation of specific social domains is perhaps the most defining characteristic. The H variety is rigidly associated with domains of high culture and formal power: sermons, political speeches, university lectures, serious prose, poetry, and formalized written communication (legal documents, newspapers). In contrast, the L variety is restricted to informal domains: conversation with family and friends, market transactions, folk literature, and intimate communication. This functional distribution is rigid; attempting to use the L variety in an H domain often results in social sanctions, mockery, or failure to communicate effectively.

Structurally, the H variety is nearly always characterized by greater grammatical complexity and historical fidelity. It typically preserves archaic morphological features, sound systems, and synthetic grammatical structures that have simplified or been lost in the L variety. Furthermore, the

H variety is always highly **codified**; its norms are fixed by prescriptive grammars, dictionaries, and official language academies, ensuring uniformity across time and space. The L variety, lacking such institutional support, tends to exhibit greater regional diversity, faster rates of linguistic change, and a less rigid structure, making it more flexible for immediate communicative needs.

Psychologically and culturally, the varieties are perceived differently. The H variety carries immense **prestige**; it is viewed as beautiful, logical, and the proper language for serious thought and intellectual pursuit. It is the gatekeeper to social mobility. Conversely, the L variety, despite being the spontaneous language of daily life, often suffers from stigmatization; speakers may believe it is inherently inferior, crude, or merely a collection of errors when compared to the H standard. Acquisition also differs profoundly: the L variety is acquired naturally during childhood, while the H variety must be learned formally through years of dedicated schooling, often treated pedagogically like a foreign tongue, further cementing its elite status.

4. Distinction from Bilingualism and Code-Switching

The primary conceptual challenge in understanding diglossia is distinguishing it clearly from individual **bilingualism**. Bilingualism is an individual capability--the ability of one person to use two languages or dialects proficiently. Diglossia, conversely, is a societal characteristic, describing the stable functional separation of language varieties across the domains of a community, irrespective of whether every individual masters both. A community can be bilingual without being diglossic if both languages are used randomly and interchangeably across formal and informal settings. Crucially, a community can be diglossic without being widely bilingual, such as historical scenarios where the H variety (like Latin in the Middle Ages) was only mastered by a small, educated elite, while the vast majority spoke only the L vernacular.

Fishman formalized four possible relationships between the two phenomena: (1) Diglossia and Bilingualism (ideal stability, where the H and L are functionally separate and most individuals are competent in both); (2) Diglossia without Bilingualism (H is known only by the elite, perpetuating social stratification); (3) Bilingualism without Diglossia (common in mobile, immigrant communities where functional domains are not strictly separated, leading to potential language shift); and (4) Neither Diglossia nor Bilingualism (monolingual, linguistically homogeneous communities). The stability and social consequences of a linguistic situation are heavily dependent on which of these four types prevails.

Furthermore, diglossia enforces greater linguistic discipline than typical bilingual or multilingual environments, particularly regarding **code-switching**--the practice of alternating between languages or varieties within a single speech event. In contexts where diglossia is strong, such as a university lecture or a formal legal proceeding (H domains), the introduction of L variety elements is generally highly censured or considered unprofessional. While code-switching is a hallmark of

linguistic agility and identity negotiation in many bilingual settings, the functional rigidity of a diglossic society minimizes its acceptable use in high-status settings, reinforcing the boundaries between the two forms.

5. Types and Scope of Diglossia

Scholars categorize diglossia based on the genetic relationship between the functionally separated varieties. **Endoglossia** refers to the narrow, original definition put forth by Ferguson, where the H and L varieties are genetically related dialects of the same language, though highly divergent (e.g., Swiss German dialects and Standard German). This form of diglossia often results from historical linguistic divergence where the written, prestigious standard freezes, while the spoken vernacular continues to evolve rapidly, creating the H/L gap.

Exoglossia, conversely, aligns with Fishman's broader definition, applying when the H and L varieties are genetically distinct languages. This situation often arises in post-colonial contexts where a former colonial language (e.g., French or English) maintains its status as the H variety for government, higher education, and international trade, while indigenous languages serve as the L varieties for daily communication. Exoglossia places an even greater communicative burden on speakers, as mastering the H variety requires learning an entirely separate grammatical and lexical system, thus often leading to starker social stratification based on language proficiency.

Additionally, complexity increases in highly multilingual societies, giving rise to **polyglossia**--the functional specialization of three or more language varieties. In many nations in Africa and Asia, citizens may utilize a local dialect (L1) at home, a regional lingua franca (L2) for trade and local politics, a national language (H1) for primary schooling and national administration, and a former colonial language (H2) for international affairs and advanced science. Polyglossia maintains the core principle of functional specialization and hierarchy but demonstrates the capacity of a society to manage multiple linguistic resources simultaneously, each with its own rigid domain.

6. Sociolinguistic Significance and Impact

The persistence of diglossia carries profound implications for social structures, literacy, and equity within a community. Since the H variety is invariably the language of academic instruction and bureaucratic power, proficiency in the H form serves as a critical social gatekeeper. Children who arrive at school speaking only the L variety face an immediate and substantial educational disadvantage, having to learn the language of instruction and the curriculum simultaneously. This institutional bias reinforces existing social stratification, where mastery of the prestigious H variety correlates directly with socioeconomic status and elite membership, often leading to generational cycles of educational inequality for L speakers.

Diglossia also imposes significant constraints on language planning and standardization efforts.

Attempts to elevate the L variety--to codify its structure, use it for formal written purposes, or introduce it into education--frequently provoke intense linguistic conflict. Those who benefit from the prestige of the H variety often fiercely resist such changes, sometimes arguing that the L form is incapable of expressing complex or abstract thought. This resistance can paralyze efforts to achieve linguistic democratization, leaving educational systems reliant on a language form that is difficult to acquire naturally, further hindering mass literacy.

Furthermore, the diglossic situation creates an identity tension within the individual speaker. The H variety is associated with formal authority, history, and often religious sanctity, compelling speakers to adopt a distant or unnatural persona when using it. The L variety, while stigmatized, remains the sole vehicle for genuine intimacy, humor, and emotional expression, binding the individual to their family and community. This dual linguistic reality ensures a continuous tension between the pressure to conform to the prestigious standard (H) and the psychological need for authentic, spontaneous communication (L).

7. Examples of Diglossic Societies

One of the most widely cited and stable examples is the diglossia found throughout the **Arabic-speaking world**. Here, **Classical Arabic (H)**--the language of the Qur'an and classical literature--and its subsequent modernization, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), serve as the H variety, utilized for formal written texts, news broadcasts, and university lectures. Coexisting with the H form are numerous regional **Arabic Vernaculars (L)**, such as Egyptian, Iraqi, or Moroccan Arabic, which are mutually unintelligible in their extreme forms and are used universally for daily conversation. The gap between the MSA and the vernaculars is so vast that mastering the H form constitutes learning a separate grammar and vocabulary set, reinforcing the functional separation and social hierarchy.

A classic endoglossic example is found in the German-speaking regions of **Switzerland**. The L variety, **Swiss German (Schwyzerdütsch)**, comprises several distinct Alemannic dialects used universally in almost all spoken contexts--home, market, local radio, and even informal business settings. The H variety, **Standard German (Hochdeutsch)**, is reserved for formal written communication (newspapers, books, correspondence), national television news, and formal education beyond the initial grades. The avoidance of Standard German in casual conversation is so strong that its use often signals distance or formality, demonstrating the deep entrenchment of the domain separation.

Historically, the relationship between **Latin (H)** and the evolving **Romance Vernaculars (L)** during the Middle Ages provides a powerful model. Long after Vulgar Latin had fragmented into various spoken Romance languages, Latin remained the undisputed H variety--the language of law, the Church, scholarship, and all formal documentation across Western Europe. This functional split

persisted for hundreds of years until political and religious upheavals, such as the Reformation and the rise of national printing presses, provided the necessary institutional support for the L vernaculars to gradually assume H functions, eventually leading to the breakdown of this vast, historical diglossic system.

8. Further Reading

Diglossia - Wikipedia

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