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Diglossia in Arabic TV stations

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Abstract   This study examined Arabic diglossia types and the circumstances under which they were used in some Arabic TV stations. Diglossia involves use of two varieties of the same language by the same society for different functions. To address this purpose, the study made use of a cross-sectional survey research design that involved systematic observations of filmed programs and content analysis of verbatim transcribed documents. Data analysis indicated that diglossia was found in the target channels in two varieties, high and low Arabic. Although both varieties were observed across the target channels, each variety use depended on the context of each TV station, program type and the background of each program audience. The study provides recommendations for policy-makers in regards to language planning, TV channels officials, Arabic language program education and future research.

1. Introduction

Although language has been the object of investigation for centuries, language relation to society was studied only a few decades ago when the field of linguistics introduced the sociolinguistics sub-discipline. Sociolinguistics is "that part of linguistics which is concerned with language as a social and cultural phenomenon. It investigates the field of language and society and has close connections with the social sciences,

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especially social psychology, anthropology, human geography, and sociology" (Trudgill, 1995, pp. 20–21).

Sociolinguists have recently investigated new phenomena, such as language varieties, speech communities, colloquialism, vernaculars, dialects, the functions of different language varieties within communities and diglossia. Diglossia refers to "the presence of a high and a low style or standard in a language, one for formal use in writing and some speech situations and one for colloquial use" (Harris and Hodges, 1981, p. 88). Sociolinguists are now more concerned with diglossia to understand why the same speech community uses sub-varieties in the same language for different functions. Likewise, this study examined Arabic diglossia types in some Arabic TV stations to identify the circumstances under which language varieties are used in the Arabic context.

2. Conceptual framework

This section surveys the literature round diglossia in general and Arabic diglossia in particular.

2.1. Diglossia and sociolinguistics

According to Kaye (1975), the term diglossia was coined by Marçais (1930) while brought to the attention of sociolinguists by Ferguson (1959) where two or more varieties of the same language may be used by the native speakers of that language in different circumstances for distinct functions. In other words, people in one particular speech community may sometimes speak the standard form and sometimes the regional vernacular of their language based on various factors such as the background of the speakers, the formality of the topic, and the situation. For instance, while it is acceptable to use the local vernacular at home or among family and friendship (Versteegh, 2004), it may not be so when presenting the news on TV. The standard variety is expected in such a situation. According to Ferguson (1959), diglossia is

> a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or original 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. (p. 336)

Ferguson (1959) names four diglossic languages: Arabic, Swiss German, Haitian (French and Creole), and Greek. He indicates that in each diglossic language there is a high (H) and low variety (L) and that each variety is employed in different circumstances for different functions. For example, H variety can be used for sermons in churches or mosques, university lectures, political speeches, broadcasting news in radio and on television. The H variety can be also used to some extent in classroom instruction, writing poetry, novels, biographies/autobiographies and editorials in newspapers and magazines. On the other hand, L variety might be used in conversations with the family, friends, household servants, in 'folk literature' and the like. Sometimes, however, the two varieties H and L can be used in the same context with the same audience. In a mosque sermon, for example, where the medium should be classical Arabic, sometimes the L variety is used to ensure more understanding.

Wardhaugh (1986) further identifies two varieties in each of the above-mentioned four languages. He states that: in

> the Arabic situation the two varieties are Classical Arabic (H) and the various regional colloquial varieties (L). In Switzerland they are Standard German (H) and Swiss German (L). In Haiti the varieties are Standard French (H) and Haitian Creole (L). In Greece they are the Katharevousa (H) and Dhimotiki, or Demotic (L), varieties of Greek. (p. 87)

Accordingly, there are differences between the H and L variety regarding prestige. Where the H variety has prestige, the L variety lacks such prestige. In Arabic, for instance, the classical language, the H variety, is more 'beautiful', 'expressive', and 'logical' than the L variety. Classical Arabic is the language of the Quran some fourteen centuries old and the language of classical literature for about two centuries before the Quran. Although the H variety has superiority over the L variety, there are occasions where using the H variety may not be appropriate. Using the H variety, for instance, in an informal activity, such as conversing with family or very close friends is inappropriate. In fact, sometimes a speaker may be an object of ridicule if he/she uses the H variety in circumstances where the L variety should be used.

Furthermore, the two varieties are acquired differently. Whereas children without any formal instruction learn the L variety naturally, the H variety is learned officially in school or religious places, such as churches or mosques. In order for people in a diglossic society to acquire the H variety, they have to pursue formal language instruction, including studying grammar and using dictionaries and textbooks. Saville-Troike (1982, pp. 54–55) outlines the major differences between the H and L varieties:

1. There is a specialization of function for H and L.
2. H has a higher level of prestige than L, and is considered superior.
3. There is a literary heritage in H, but not in L.
4. There are different circumstances of acquisition; children learn L at home, and H in school.
5. The H variety is standardized, with a tradition of grammatical study and established norms and orthography.
6. The grammar of H variety is more complex, more highly inflected.
7. H and L varieties share the bulk of their vocabularies, but there is some complementary distribution of terms.
8. The phonology of H and L is a single complex system.

It is of significance to point out here that the term diglossia, defined by Ferguson (1959), is very specific in that it requires that the High and Low varieties should belong to the same language, e.g. Literary or Classical and Colloquial Arabic. However, the term diglossia may not only include sub-varieties of one language, but rather two or more languages in the same speech community. Fishman (1967) broadened the term to include any society in which bilingual or multilingual situations exist for different functions and circumstances. Fishman provided examples for bilingual situations where the different languages have distinct functions, such as Spanish and Guarani in Paraguay, and Standard English and Caribbean Creole. However, Hudson (1980) indicated that such an extension may be "a regrettable development, as it would seem to make every society diglossic, including even English-speaking England." (p. 55). This paper, however, adopted Ferguson's (1959) definition of diglossia.

2.2. Diglossia in Arabic

Arabic diglossia seems to have existed in Arab communities for more than fourteen centuries. The most characterizing feature of Arabic is the existence of diglossia (Al-Batal, 1995; Haeri, 2000). The purpose of this article, though, is not to discuss changes that Arabic language has undergone. Various researchers have shed some light on changes in Arabic devel-