

APPROACHES TO DIGLOSSIA IN THE CLASSROOM: THE MIDDLE WAY

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of diglossia was developed by Ferguson (1959). It describes a situation where two languages or language varieties occur side by side in a community, and each has a clear range of functions. One of these varieties, the **H-variety** (standing for 'High'), is adopted as the standard variety and is used in official situations, such as government broadcasts, religious services, and teaching; and the other, the **L-variety** (for 'Low'), is used in informal situations, such as local markets and conversations between friends. The focus of this article is to discuss how the concept of diglossia might be appropriate to describe the Singapore English-speaking community, and to consider what approaches can be adopted by teachers towards the use of the L-variety in schools.

Examples of diglossia that have been widely quoted are:

- the **Arabic** community, where each region has its own colloquial variety, but classical Arabic is still taught in schools and is regarded by many as “more beautiful” and therefore more appropriate for written texts;
- the **Swiss-German** community, where all children learn Standard German in schools, and most books and newspapers are in Standard German, but the people continue to use the local Swiss-German dialect on an everyday basis;

- the **Tamil** community, where the language taught in classrooms and used in literature is sharply different from the colloquial variety.

In all these societies, there is high prestige in demonstrating an ability to use the H-variety, but not everyone has sufficient education to achieve this. However, all members of the society use the L-variety at home and when chatting with close friends. In fact, use of the H-variety instead of the L-variety in an informal situation would be regarded as quite absurd.

DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF DIGLOSSIA

Three characteristics of a diglossic situation can be identified:

- the circumstances under which each variety is used are clearly defined, so there is little mixing between the two
- the two varieties are clearly separate linguistically, so that at one time a speaker may be speaking either the H-variety or the L-variety, but never something half-way between the two
- everyone can speak the L-variety, and will do so in informal situations, such as with friends and family members; but not everyone can use the H-variety

However, the strict separation between the two varieties has been questioned, for example by Fasold (1984), so even in

the archetypal diglossic Arabic and Tamil societies, there may be more of a continuum between the H and L varieties than was once supposed.

RESEARCH ON STYLES OF ENGLISH IN SINGAPORE

Pakir (1991a, 1991b) describes the usage of English in Singapore with a model of 'expanding triangles', such that the style of English adopted varies according to two variables: the proficiency of the speaker, and the formality of the occasion. According to this model, the most proficient speakers have the largest triangle, with the greatest range of styles, while less well-educated speakers have a smaller range to modify their speech in formal situations.

Poedjosoedarmo (1995) develops this model, observing that the triangle representing well-educated speakers does not necessarily share the same base as that for less proficient speakers, because the better-educated may never use the most colloquial variety of English; and the model needs to be modified further to allow for variation due to such factors as age, gender, and ethnic origin (Deterding and Poedjosoedarmo, 1998:149).

Instead of describing such variation along a continuum, Gupta (1992) prefers to describe the Singapore English-speaking community as exhibiting diglossia, as she observes that many members of this community are proficient in two distinct different varieties of English:

- **SSE** (for 'Singapore Standard English'): an H-variety which is close to the standard variety taught in schools.

- **SCE** (for 'Singapore Colloquial English'): an L-variety that is widely used in informal situations. This colloquial variety is commonly known as 'Singlish'.

Many students quite naturally switch between these two varieties, as, for instance, when moving from the classroom where they use SSE, to the canteen where they immediately switch to SCE to chat with friends, and this behaviour supports a diglossic model.

Gupta (1994) charts the progress of four young children, two girls in one family and two boys in another, as they develop the ability to switch between SSE and SCE in appropriate situations. She shows that while the children make little difference in the language they use with different speakers at a very early age, by time they are five, they are rather more likely to use features of Standard English when talking with Gupta (an expatriate) than with their sibling or mother.

The 'expanding triangles' model suggests some problems with describing the Singapore English-speaking community as truly diglossic:

- It is not clear that the two varieties are completely distinct. There may be more of a continuum between them, because, for example, some members of the community whose level of education is not very high have an H-variety that is halfway between SSE and SCE.
- There are some members of the community who never use the L-variety. This is particularly true of some of the older generation of

English-educated people, who may have a strong aversion to the use of SCE, though it seems to be used by almost all young Singaporeans in some situations.

Even though the Singapore English-speaking community may not meet all the defining characteristics of a strict definition of diglossia, if we accept that diglossia may be used to describe situations where the separation between the two language varieties is not absolute, then the concept may be useful in describing the linguistic situation in the English-community in Singapore, or at least the young generation of this community.

ENGLISH IN THE SINGAPORE CLASSROOM

Regardless of whether we can describe the Singapore English-speaking community as strictly diglossic or not, it is undoubtedly true that many students use SCE (Singlish) regularly, and many but not all students may have the ability to switch to a more standard variety of English under some circumstances. What attitude should school teachers adopt towards the use of SCE?

Trudgill (1995:185-188) identifies three possible approaches to dealing with the use of non-standard dialects in school:

1. **elimination of non-standard speech**: Teachers at all times try to prevent students using their non-standard varieties, and correct every occurring instance of a non-standard feature. Some teachers even go as far as punishing students who refuse to conform in the use of the standard variety;

2. **bidialectism**: Teachers accept that the non-standard variety will continue to be used in informal situations, but try to encourage the use of the standard variety for some situations in school, particularly for written work;
3. **appreciation of dialect differences**: If children suffer because they use a non-standard variety, this is the fault of society, not of the children. It is society's attitudes that should be changed, not the language of children.

The first of these approaches is extremely common in schools, not just in Singapore, but in England as well. The problem is that it is unlikely to be successful in many cases, because it is very hard to change the way that people speak, particularly as there is strong peer pressure among children to use the same speech habits as their classmates, not their teachers. This approach may also be destructive, as it is implying that students are inferior on the basis of the way they speak.

The third approach, of trying to change society, is exceptionally idealistic. While many people believe that society should indeed be changed, we have to recognise that this is not going to happen in the short term, and while society is the way it is, the future prospects of students are harmed if they are unable to use a variety of English that is close to the standard. Not only will they suffer when they take their examinations, they will also lose out when they have to speak in formal situations, such as attending job interviews. Only extremists would be willing to sacrifice the future prospects of their students for ideological reasons.

For this reason, the second approach, of teachers accepting the existence of two varieties of English, but trying to encourage the use of a standard variety for some purposes, is the middle path between the two extremes, and it is the approach that is most likely to be successful. It is even possible for teachers to encourage students to be proud of their own indigenous variety of English while simultaneously stressing that access to the standard variety is vitally important for future success. And teachers can furthermore recognise that the ability to switch appropriately between the H and L varieties of English when required demonstrates sophisticated behaviour that shows a good understanding of the linguistic demands of the society we live in.

CONCLUSION

As a colloquial variety of English is widely established among young people in Singapore, it is not possible to eliminate it. At the same time, however, students need to be aware that the ability to use a more standard variety easily and competently in some situations is absolutely essential for their future. Acceptance of the two varieties, and encouragement for students to select the most appropriate variety for each situation is therefore the most moderate and practical approach.

Attempts to eliminate Singlish entirely by punishing students who use it, and recommendations that Singlish should be adopted in the classroom, represent two extreme positions, both of which should be avoided.

IMPLICATIONS

A colloquial variety of English seems to be becoming established as the informal language of choice among many young Singaporeans. Teachers need to consider carefully how to deal with this non-standard variety. If we follow the suggestions of Trudgill (1995), we can conclude:

1. *It is impossible to eliminate Singlish.*

Attempts to eliminate the use of colloquial English by Singaporean schoolchildren are almost certainly doomed to failure, and are likely to be counter-productive.

2. *Proficiency in Standard English is essential for everyone.*

Use of standard English will certainly continue to be required for exams and also in many formal situations in Singapore. Anyone who is not able to use Standard English when required will be at a disadvantage.

3. *Teachers should encourage the use of Standard English in the classroom.*

To ensure that their pupils develop proficiency in standard English, teachers should encourage them to use it at all times in the classroom and when writing.

4. *Teachers can be tolerant towards the use of Singlish outside the classroom.*

While pupils should learn to use standard English in the classroom and when writing, teachers can adopt a tolerant attitude towards the use of colloquial English by their pupils in informal situations outside of the classroom.

5. *Pupils can be proud of their ability in the two varieties.*

Pupils can be given a sense of pride in their effective use of the two different varieties in suitable situations. Successful use of colloquial English in informal situations and standard English in the classroom and when writing demonstrates sophisticated linguistic behaviour.

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