

Linguistic Co-existence: Disinterring Diglossic Cases among the Vatsonga

Babane Morris Thembhani

MER Mathivha Centre for African Languages, Arts and Culture, University of Venda,
P/Bag X5050, Thohoyandou, 0950, South Africa
E-mail: babane@univen.ac.za

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ABSTRACT This paper draws on sociolinguistic fieldwork among speakers of Xitsonga in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Previous research has shown that Ferguson is the first to introduce the concept of diglossia and was later supported by Fishman. In Limpopo Province Xitsonga shares a linguistic and cultural space with both Tshivenda and Northern Sotho. The study seeks to explain why a particular language is preferred instead of another given certain circumstances. The study is qualitative in nature and investigates diglossia in selected Vatsonga communities. The data was collected using both the observation and interview techniques. The paper shows the implications of diglossia in terms of language development especially regarding a language that is relegated to a subordinate status. The results of this study shows that the prevalence of diglossia among Vatsonga was apparent even prior to the arrival of European settlers in the region.

INTRODUCTION

Diglossia is a natural linguistic phenomenon which is gaining momentum in many communities among Vatsonga since the dawn of democracy in South Africa. It was first introduced in the field of sociolinguistics by American sociolinguist Charles Ferguson in his historic and epic article presented in the seminar and published in 1959. After this publication, a number of scholars have conducted research based on defining the principles he suggested. According to Ferguson's (1959: 336) original definition, diglossia as a sociolinguistic concept refers to:

A relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of a 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.

Fergusson's concept of diglossia clearly shows that in a diglossic situation there are two or more varieties of the same language which are linguistically related but used in different settings and for different purposes in the society. However, their functions are complementa-

ry, with one regarded as a high (or H) variety and the other as a low (or L) variety. The distinction between these two varieties is stated by Britto (1991: 61) who said "*total superposition does not imply that every member of a diglossic community knows H and uses H, but merely that there is no portion of the community which actually knows H and uses H without also knowing L.*"

Accordingly, the superposed code (H) is used in formal situations such as education, administration, religion and other formal communication. Obviously, this variety (H) is generally not used by any section of the community for ordinary conversation. While on the other hand, the underposed code (L) is used mainly in informal contacts and local usage (Ferguson 1959). The two discrepant varieties are acquired differently, thus, the H variety is learned formally largely through formal means of instruction, while the L variety is acquired informally. It is clear that diglossia is not defined as an individual phenomenon at the level of the speaker but as a social phenomenon at the speech community level.

From the preceding discussion one could realise that from Fergusson's point of view, there are important defining characteristics of diglossia. Deterding (1998: 18) identified the following characteristics of a diglossic situation which are relevant for this study:

- ♦ 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

The views postulated by Fergusson above were mainly on diglossic situation where the same language has different varieties which perform complementary functions. The other popularizer of diglossia was Joshua Fishman (1967) who has further broadened the concept of diglossia to encompass a situation where two completely different languages are spoken in a community. In this case, a clear distinction must be made as to which language to use in which situation. The focus of this paper will be on a diglossic situation where two totally unrelated languages share a linguistic space as proposed by Fishman.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to give a detailed account of the diglossic situation in which Vatsonga share a linguistic and cultural space with Vavenda and Basotho ba Lebowa.

Recent Work on Diglossia

This section aims at reviewing the most recent, relevant and related academic contributions made by various researchers on diglossia. It is through the review of these literatures that the researcher decides on what kind of information and evidence are necessary to be included in this study. The review of related literature helps to identify some gaps and also to compare the present study with related situations (Diana 2012). Works of different scholars are reviewed in the following paragraphs.

Deterding (1998) conducted a study titled *Approaches to Diglossia in the Classroom: The Middle Way*. The main focus of this study was to consider what approaches to be adopted by teachers towards the use of the L-variety in schools in the Singapore English-speaking community. In this study, Deterding observes that many students frequently use SCE (Singapore Colloquial English) which is an L-variety instead of SSE (Singapore Standard English). However,

in the classroom situation they are compelled to switch to the more standard variety of English. In fact, teachers prevent students from using their non-standard varieties. Deterding's study recommends that the use of the two varieties be accepted but trying to encourage students to use the standard variety.

The issue of diglossia was long-debated in the Arabic-speaking world and Horn (2015) also contributed immensely to these debates in his/her study titled *Diglossia in the Arab World-Educational Implications and Future Perspectives*. Horn's study revealed that throughout the Arab world there is only one formal language, namely Modern Standard Arabic which is used in all formal situations such as schools, universities, TV, magazines and literature. Accordingly, this language is regarded as an H variety while the other Dialectal Arabic languages are used informally depending on the geographical provenance of the speakers (Horn 2015: 101). The situation as it is in the Arabic world supports Fergusson's theory where varieties of the same language coexist but are used for complementary purposes. The diglossic situation as discussed by Horn differs from the one discussed in this paper.

Another work which sheds more light on some of the defining principles of diglossia was conducted by Matiki (2010) titled *A Case Review of Tamil Diglossia*. In his study, Matiki applied the principles of diglossia to the case of Tamil, a language spoken in India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Singapore. The major defining principles applied included function, acquisition, prestige, standardization, stability, grammar, lexicon, and phonology. Matiki concluded that Tamil diglossia has existed for centuries and will continue to exist. The study by Matiki draws on Ferguson's definition of diglossia where two varieties of the same language are used for different functions.

METHODOLOGY

This study is aimed at explaining the role of languages in cases where two different languages share the same linguistic space. For this aim to be achieved, a qualitative research approach was utilised. According to Holloway (1997: 1), this is a research approach in which people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they find themselves in. The

techniques used to collect the data are both in-depth interviews and observations. Due to the nature of this study, the researcher was forced to spend much time in direct personal contact with those being studied in their natural settings. This was in line with Bogdan and Biklen (2007: 35) who are of the view that if you want to understand the way people think about their world you need to get close to them, to hear them talk and observe them in their day-to-day lives.

In-depth interviews and observations require that sampling be done because the total population where there is diglossia among Vatsonga was too large and the scope of the problem too wide. In order to select the communities and the participants for this study, purposive or judgmental sampling was used. A sample of two villages and ten participants from each village was selected on the basis of their typicality. In this paper, the researchers decided purposively to use two communities namely, Mpheni and Khujwana villages, two Local Government Areas, Vhembe and Mopani Districts. The main reason why the study focused on these communities is because they are situated in a diglossic environment. Furthermore, the data as presented in this paper consists of first-hand information drawn from the author's own observation and supplied by interviewees and a combination of both. Observation was done to more than forty people who participated in this research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Britto (1991) is of the view that diglossia is characterised by major defining principles such as function, acquisition and prestige. These principles will be discussed later in this paper because of their diglossic relevance. The other major defining principles which will not form part of this paper include standardization, stability, grammar, lexicon, and phonology.

For the purposes of this paper, the application of some of the principles of diglossia is in line with the original theory as suggested by Fergusson. Although there are many communities among Vatsonga where diglossia is prevalent, only two communities are selected for discussion in this paper: namely Mpheni and Khujwana. The preceding discussion draws on Fishman's extended definition of diglossia which maintains that diglossia occurs where two lin-

guistically unrelated codes (High and Low varieties) are used.

Linguistic Situation of Limpopo Province

As a country, South Africa is divided into nine provinces that are linguistically and culturally diverse with eleven official languages, many of which share both linguistic and cultural space. However, these inhabitants have different languages, culture, and customs, which obviously translate into divergent interpersonal relationships. It is correct to perceive South Africa as a polyglossic country with predominantly English transcending almost all African languages. In this paper, the linguistic coexistence of three languages, namely Xitsonga, Tshivenda and Northern Sotho will be scrutinised.

Xitsonga is the language of Vatsonga, one of the ethnic linguistic groups in Limpopo Province which, according to South Africa's 2011 census, constitutes 4.5 percent of the total population of the country (Halala and Mtebule 2014: 1).

Status and Functions of the Languages

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa has accorded eleven languages official status since the dawn of democracy (Act 108 of 1996). All these official languages are however spread across width and breadth of the country, specific languages have strong representation and prevalence in particular areas. The languages which are affected by the diglossic situation to be discussed in this paper include Northern Sotho, Xitsonga and Tshivenda. It should be emphasised that the official status of these languages is a national one, which is sometimes not recognised in some villages where these languages share linguistic space.

The geographical vastness and complex linguistic and cultural diversity of Limpopo Province before apartheid was such that the speakers of Tshivenda, Northern Sotho and Xitsonga shared a geographical space. This was so even during and after the apartheid regime. Indeed, in some areas such as Mpheni the two languages, namely Tshivenda and Xitsonga are accorded different functions. On the one hand, since Tshivenda (H variety) is accorded more public recognition, it is used more formally in government, broadcasting, education and religious ser-

vices while, on the other hand, Xitsonga (L variety) is used informally in conversation between friends, parents or relatives.

Participant 2 alluded to the fact that in Mpheni village where there are Xitsonga and Tshivenda speakers, Tshivenda has commanded prolonged public dominance. The reason for this might be statistical dominance. In schools, for example, learners are compelled to learn through the medium of Tshivenda. Dowling (2000: 1) in Seepe and Dowling noted that *"The implication is that when children are forced to learn in a language which they have not been immersed (non-mother tongue) they are bound to be at a substantial educational disadvantage."* Thus deemed inferior, the owners of Xitsonga and their culture are undermined. It is generally assumed that the speakers of this language will gradually lose their culture and identity. This is imperative because the language and culture in which a child is raised are intertwined and need to be respected. On the other hand, the language and culture of Tshivenda are regarded as superior.

As a direct and noticeable consequence Xitsonga parents from this community largely address their children either in Tshivenda or a mixture of the two languages rather than consistently their own language. It was also observed that many Xitsonga speakers even prefer to listen to radio Phalaphala FM which is a Tshivenda radio broadcasting station. The researcher's own understanding of this situation is that by so doing Xitsonga speakers are downgrading their own language, culture and customs.

In Khujwana village however power relations between Xitsonga and Northern Sotho are in favour of the former as regards status, value and formal functions. Observations made during this study revealed that Xitsonga serves as a mainstream language in this diglossic encounter. The same view was shared by Kedrebeogo (1998: 174) who said *"Knowledge of the mainstream language is vital for linguistic minorities..."* The scenarios that reveal themselves as outlined above indicate that even though all three languages are official languages of the country, their diglossic statuses dictate their supremacy within their respective communities.

Acquisition

The residents of Mpheni come from different linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. However,

this study found that language fluency of both Xitsonga and Tshivenda is not an insurmountable challenge. In this village, all Xitsonga speakers are bilingual because they acquire their first or native language simultaneously with Tshivenda which is the High variety. It worth mentioning that the population overbearing of the Tshivenda speakers contributes to the dominance of their language.

In Mpheni, Xitsonga is a language of the lower variety which is acquired naturally from childhood since it is spoken informally with parents, friends and community at large. The same sentiment was echoed by Seepe and Dowling (2000: 1) who said *"...language acquisition is a public activity in that it consists of learning by imitating the linguistic behaviour of one's primary caretaker (typically the mother), one's family and one's community."* It was observed during this study that the manner of Xitsonga acquisition in this diglossic situation hinders the linguistic growth of the child since it ends up not being used at schools and other formal situations. Obviously, this change impedes knowledge acquisition and limits the child's academic progress since language forms the basis of learning.

Different from the linguistic acquisition whereby Xitsonga has L-variety, is a diglossic situation in Khujwana where Xitsonga has an H-variety. In Khujwana, Xitsonga and Northern Sotho share a linguistic space since time immemorial. Informally, these languages are spoken equally by the residents of this village. However, Northern Sotho speakers are forced also to adopt Xitsonga in formal situations.

It has also come to the attention of the researcher that the knowledge of the Northern Sotho language seems to be gradually gaining more ground and replacing that of the Xitsonga amongst the school children rather than complement each other. This linguistic behaviour is evidenced by the use of code-switching by an increasing number of students at secondary school where Northern Sotho is taught. Some participants alluded to the fact that there were occasionally serious linguistic conflicts among members of the community which resulted in the establishment of a Northern Sotho medium school.

Prestige

The language with a high variety has high prestige compared to the language that has low

variety in the same community. Because of their different status, these languages play unequal roles in various contexts within the same the community. Deterding (1998: 18) concurred by indicating that “*there is high prestige in demonstrating an ability to use the H-variety, but not everyone has sufficient education to achieve this.*” In Mpheni and Khujwana, Tshivenda and Northern Sotho respectively enjoy high variety and high esteem.

In these communities, the languages with low esteem are deemed unofficial, and, as such, they are relegated to informal use during cultural activities, rituals and other interpersonal communication among members of the community. On the other hand, elevated prestige is given to the languages with H-variety and used as cornerstones for basic political power and dominance. These have a bearing on Tshivenda, Xitsonga and Northern Sotho in Mpheni and Khujwana where these diglossic situations are evidenced.

CONCLUSION

This paper was based on the extended scope of diglossia as defined by Fishman in which a bilingual situation uses different languages for different purposes. The issue of diglossia has existed in the communities discussed above for centuries. The discussion in this study shows that in diglossic communities the hegemony of Tshivenda, Xitsonga or Northern Sotho will remain as long as the speakers of a particular language has a higher number of speakers in that community. However, the supremacy of these languages will not in any way avoid the languages being dominated. In fact, the speakers of the language with low status still have the opportunity to practice their culture, customs and traditions as well as speak their language. Having said this, several attempts are underway to make these languages part and parcel of the school’s curriculum since they are presently not taught in these diglossic situations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that the economic, political, educational and social powers should

be shared equally in order to give opportunities to all languages that are used. It could be recommended that in a diglossic situations such as the ones discussed in this paper, the implementation of the language policy in education should be done in order to cater for those children whose languages are not taught. It seems quite reasonable to recommend that although the factor of language shift is very high in a diglossic situation, speakers of both languages involved should be encouraged to always maintain their languages and culture.

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