Diglossia, code-switching, style shifting: A field theory of variety alternation

Gregory R. Guy and Laureen Lim

It is the norm rather than the exception for speakers and speech communities to command a range of language varieties and systematically alternate among them. But this generalization encompasses situations that have been described in very distinct ways, as if they constituted discrete sociolinguistic isolates: stylistic variation, code-switching, diglossia, and post-creole continua all describe the use of multiple varieties in the speech of an individual or a community. How are these situations related? What aspects of the language or the social circumstances make for, say, diglossia as opposed to style-shifting? This paper seeks to present a general framework for analysing sociolinguistic alternation among language varieties. We present data from Singapore English and Brazilian Portuguese to show how these issues might be better addressed in terms of continuously varying parameters, instead of taxonomic oppositions.

We argue that the labeled situations are not discrete types, but points in a continuously field of variety alternation which is defined by two principal dimensions, one linguistic and one social. The linguistic dimension involves the degree of linguistic similarity between the varieties in alternation.

, and the extent of overlap between the varieties in terms of their social circumstances of usage. Thus code-switching may involve entirely distinct languages, but they may alternate within the same discourse or the same sentence, while Fergusonian diglossia (Ferguson 1959) involves related dialects of a language which are discretely separated according to discourse situations. Sociolinguistic style-shifting is treated as involving minimally different speech styles that may be distinguished only by frequencies of usage of sociolinguistic variables, which may alternate within the same discourse but are often distinguished by topic, interlocutor or other situational factors.

An important issue that arises is the question of whether the varieties are generated by the same or different mental grammars: a Spanish/English code-switcher is generally seen as possessing two grammars, while style-shifting is viewed as occurring within the single grammar of a possibly monolingual speaker. But what analysis is appropriate for intermediate cases, such as speakers who alternate between standard and non-standard sociolects, especially when the latter are ethnically based or involve prior language contact (e.g. AAVE and Standard English, or Colloquial and Standard Singapore English)? Such speakers are often seen as commanding a larger grammatical range than monolingual style-shifters. We argue that these issues may be treated empirically by considering constraint effects on variable processes. To the extent that varieties show the same constraints, they reflect the same grammars. Hence purely quantitative adjustments in the frequency of variables, as occurs in monolingual style shifting, reflects more grammatical unity than changes in the ranking of constraint effects, which we find in our Singaporean speakers, or the different constraint effects found in contrasting contact-influenced dialects of Portuguese in bilingual communities in Brazil.

Linguistically heterogeneous communities systematically problematize the categorical treatment of style-shifting, code-switching and diglossia, presenting intermediate cases with a mixture of characteristics. As Woolard notes, a sociolinguistics that embraces diversity "should place bilingual and multilingual speakers … at its center… New insights could derive from such a shift in perspective." One such insight is that alternating varieties are better understood in terms of a spectrum of characteristics than as a collection of discrete syndromes.

References:
Ferguson, Charles A. 1959. Diglossia. *Word* 15:325-40.

Woolard, Kathryn A. 1999. Simultaneity and Bivalency as Strategies in Bilingualism. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 8(1): 3-29.