Language and Society (CL2.203)

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Quiz 3

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Question 1

Chomsky's notion of *competence* was put forward by him in contrast to *performance*; he distinguished these two characteristics of language use. Competence has been described as "what speakers know about their language"[1], *i.e.*, their capacity of speaking their language, and according to Chomsky, it is the primary concern of linguistic theory. As opposed to performance, it is not affected by circumstances like lack of memory or attention, or errors, and so on (Chomsky (1965, 3-4), quoted by Wardhaugh).
Thus, competence is a psychological (and theoretical) reality, while performance is tangible and realised in the form of actual, real-life utterances by speakers.

Communicative competence, on the other hand, is composed of aspects of both Chomsky's notions of competence and performance. The knowledge of the speaker of a language (their competence) is more than just the structures and pronunciations; it is the knowledge of what to say in which situation. It includes knowledge of nuances like politeness and respect, and their reflexes in language. Similarly, their performance is the physical manifestation of this aspect of their knowledge – the actual usage of appropriate variants in their respective situations, possibly with slips of tongue, lapses of memory, and so on. Communicative competence encompasses both these.

Taking an example from Malayalam, Chomsky's notion of competence could be illustrated by a speaker's knowledge of grammar, enabling them to produce and understand utterances. For example, the utterance `eVnikk veVlYlYaM warAmO?` ("can (you) give me water?") would convey meaning to the mind of a speaker, due to their competence.
An example of communicative competence, however, lies in the knowledge that

[1] Wardhaugh, Ronald, and Janet M. Fuller. *An introduction to sociolinguistics*. John Wiley & Sons, 2021.

this is not the most polite way to talk; in addressing a superior, it would be more appropriate to include the word `oVnn` ("just"), so one would say `eVnikk oVnn veVlYlYaM warAmO?` ("could (you) just give me water?").

Question 2

From the preliminary parts of Ferguson's article, one example comes to mind. Malayalam has a number of region- and religion-based varieties; it is qidely acknowledged that, say, Kannur Malayalam (spoken in North Kerala) is significantly different from both "standard" and, say, Trivandrum Malayalam (spoken in South Kerala). We quote "standard" here as there is no official standard for the Malayalam language as yet, but there exists a variety popularly considered the standard.
The example of diglossia lies in the use of regional dialects. Most people are capable of speaking their respective regional varieties as well as the standard (which is commonly taught in schools); hence they use the former in the house and among people from the same region, and the latter in more formal situations or with people from elsewhere. This is parallel to the examples Ferguson himself gives, of Italian, Farsi and Arabic.

However, there are some characteristics of the situation in Malayalam which may mean that it cannot be considered diglossic. First, Ferguson says that "all the defining languages have names for H and L"; this is not the case in Malayalam. Characterisations like `kaNNUr BARa` ("Kannur language") and `wiruvananwapuraM BARa` ("Trivandrum language") are common. It is also common to refer to conversational speech as `lOpicca BARa` ("corrupted language"), when it does not conform to prescriptivist norms of pronunciation or syntax. However, these are not considered *names* for varieties; they are merely vague characterisations that are popularly understood. Moreover, there are no such potential terms for the H variety.
A later part of the article talks about significant differences in grammatical structure between H and L: "H has grammatical categories not present in L and has an inflectional system of nouns and verbs which is much reduced or totally absent in L", according to Ferguson. This is not the case in Malayalam; the phonetic forms of inflections are occasionally changed in informal speech (for example the suffix `-aw` is often reduced to `-e`, as in `veNdaw` ("what is wanted") being pronounced `veNde`). The bulk of the inflectional system, however, is identical between the so-called "standard" and the regional varieties.

I feel that Ferguson's demarcation of functions is not at all likely to be unambiguous in most cases. For example, he mentions "Conversations with family, friends and colleagues" under a single heading, but it is very possible conversations with colleagues are in a different variety from those with family and friends. Similarly there might be a distinction between clsose friends and simple aquaintances, or between elder and younger family members. Then there are "Personal letters", whose variety may be determined by the relation between

the speaker and the recipient.
In Malayalam, in the cases of "Poetry", "Sermon in church or mosque" (although my personal experience extends only to temples), "Political speech", "News broadcast", the usage of H matches up with his demarcation. A closer look, however, exhibits many discrepancies.
Frequently, colleagues are from different parts of the state, and therefore use the standard variety in communication. A similar consideration applies to the case of "Instructions to servants, waiters, etc."
Ferguson also mentions "Radio soap operas". In my experience, Malayalam soap operas (broadcasted on TV) use artificially slow and formal speech, while Ferguson characterises this as a situation for L.

I feel that in the absence of a very clear functional demarcation (clearer than what Ferguson puts forward), it is difficult to exactly characterise the situation as diglossic.

Question 3

Part 1

Yes, language's role in education in a multilingual society can definitely increase inequalities. Invariably, one language (or variety) eventually begins to occupy a place of prestige (or retain its prestige from previous circumstances); this leads to more opportunities for speakers of that language or variety, and fewer opportunities for others. In addition, institutions automatically deemed "better" or "worse" depending on their use of the prestige variety. A vicious cycle is created, widening a gap between the haves and have-nots. Thus the use of language in education is an important issue, with wide-ranging repercussions on society and the lives of people.

There is always resistance to the inclusion of minority languages in education. The following are some possible reasons for this.

It is probable that the inclusion of a minority language will deepen the social (and, if any, economic) divide between the two language communities. New institutions would be set up for teaching in the minority language, which will only be supported by the minority community; thus the interaction among the communities will reduce significantly.

There are also pragmatic reasons to oppose it. The consideration of human resources immediately presents a problem: if education is to be only in the minority, or in both the minority as well as the majority language, educational professionals who are fluent in the required languages are required. This may not be convenient, especially in a situation where the minority language might be less prestigious.
Similarly, there is the logistical problem of new policies and institutions having to be set up on the basis of the minority language. This is not always feasible.

Wardhaugh also discusses the question of status; the minority language's lack of prestige is a common reason to oppose it in education as well[2].

Part 2

The existing situation in India is difficult to characterise briefly, given the size of the country and the extreme variety which is prevalent across regions. However, it is probably safe to say that there is in fact a gap between the language policy on the medium of instruction and the actually followed practices.

The justification behind that view lies in the huge number of schools that are officially "English-medium". It is possible that the instruction and interaction in at least some of these institutions is in fact, to a large extent, in the vernacular. I have seen an instance of this in the education of a relative of mine in Kerala; although the school is an English medium one, they are not as fluent in English as would be expected (although it must be noted that this could be due to the online mode of instruction).

As for why this is, it is almost certainly due to the perception of English in India. It is nearly universally (implicitly or otherwise) considered a "better" language, and has a higher prestige in the eyes of many Indians. Thus there is an impression of status inherent in an institution which is "English-medium", if only on paper. This social issue has been explored in Malayalam and Hindi movies (*Salt Mango Tree* and *Angrezi Medium* respectively), which show the lengths to which parents go to enroll their children in English medium schools.

Part 3

The benefits of mother tongue education are twofold – one aspect is the psychological effect on the child and the actual improvement in their education.

The use of the mother tongue in education, mentally speaking, legitimises the mother tongue in the eyes of the student. Consider a situation in which a child speaks the mother tongue only at home, but is not taught it (or even allowed to speak it) at school. Such circumstances inevitably create associations of inferiority with the mother tongue in the mind of the student. This may even cause the student to avoid speaking it altogether, leading to attrition.

A more concrete benefit is the actual improvement seen in the education of students who are instructed in their mother tongue. Wardhaugh quotes the Ramírez Report[3], which shows that Spanish-speaking children with more years of bilingual education ended up performing better even in English standardised tests in the sixth grade.

[2]Wardhaugh, Ronald, and Janet M. Fuller. *An introduction to sociolinguistics.* John Wiley & Sons, 2021.

[3]Wardhaugh, Ronald, and Janet M. Fuller. *An introduction to sociolinguistics.* John Wiley & Sons, 2021.

Question 4

Part 1

Yes, a language can definitely be sexist. It is possible that words, phrasings or grammatical constructions in a language are considered sexist.

For example, a feature of Telugu that is becoming less and less common in recent times is the (extremely informal) use of the pronoun `axi` to refer to both 3rd person neutral and 3rd person feminine referents, *i.e.*, to mean both "she" and "it". The verbal inflection for both genders remains the same, however – for example, `AmeV vaswunxi` ("she is coming") and `axi vaswunxi` ("it is coming").

A more controversial example, which I initially saw in the context of Spanish but which applies to Hindi as well, is the "default gender". When the gender is unspecified or (in the case of a group) mixed, both these languages use the masculine form. For example, the community of people of Hispanic origin is often called *Latinos*, which is in fact the masculine plural. Similarly, in Hindi, a translation of "Who is coming?" would be `kOna A rahA hE?`, where `rahA` indicates the default masculine gender. In fact, there is a movement to use the word *Latinx* (pronounced "latin-eks") in Spanish to refer to the community.

Wardhaugh also gives examples, quoting Penelope (1988), like *fireman* and *policeman*, that perpetuate gender-based stereotypes of "appropriate" occupations for men and women[4].

Part 2

Wardaugh cites four potential examples of different speech systems based on gender. The first, quoted from Sapir (1929), is the Yana language of California; it differed based not only on the gender of the speaker, but also of the addressee. The example of the Dyirbal language of Austrialia shows two dialects available to both genders but to be used only in very specific gender-based situations – in the presence of one's spouse's parent of the opposite gender to oneself.
Yanyuwa, an other Austrialian aboriginal language, has two dialects with differing prefixes (but not stems) of words. The use of the dialect is determined solely by gender of the speaker.
Finally, Wardhaugh describes the situation of Japanese, which has one different particle and one different pronoun between the men's and women's varieties. However, this may be undergoing a shift currently[5].

In Malayalam, there are very few (if any) such differences between men's and women's speech. The only potential example that immediately comes to mind is the words `peVffalYa` and `AffalYa`, which mean "sister" and "brother", but

[4] Wardhaugh, Ronald, and Janet M. Fuller. *An introduction to sociolinguistics.* John Wiley & Sons, 2021.

[5] Wardhaugh, Ronald, and Janet M. Fuller. *An introduction to sociolinguistics.* John Wiley & Sons, 2021.

only if the *ego* is of the opposite gender. That is, `peVffalYa` is only used to talk about the sister of a male person, and `AffalYa` only about the brother of a female person.