



When Languages Change: Sociolinguistic Study of Diglossia, Bilingualism, Multilingualism, Code-Switching

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Abstract

This article explores diglossia, bilingualism/multilingualism, and code-switching in multilingual societies to understand the social functions and identities associated with language use. These three concepts play a crucial role in sociolinguistics, providing insights into how language functions in communication and in shaping social and cultural identities. The purpose of this study is to identify the role of each of these linguistic phenomena in a social context. Using qualitative methods through a literature review of various sources, including theories from leading linguists such as Charles A. Ferguson, Joshua A. Fishman, and Carol Myers-Scotton, diglossia reflects social division through “high” and “low” languages; bilingualism allows for linguistic flexibility without rigid functional rules; and code-switching is used to adapt communication to social or emotional situations. These phenomena highlight the importance of language as a tool for communication and identity in multilingual societies.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of language use in multilingual societies is an intriguing topic of study in sociolinguistics. In various communities, the use of more than one language or language variation in different contexts reflects the complexity of the underlying social and cultural structures (Ferguson, 1959). Three key concepts frequently discussed in this context are diglossia, bilingualism/multilingualism, and code-switching. These three terms have distinct definitions and characteristics but are often used interchangeably, particularly in multilingual communities (Grumah, 2025). Studying these three phenomena can help us understand the dynamics of language in society and its influence on social and cultural identity, as well as interpersonal communication. Simply put, diglossia is a linguistic situation within a society in which there are two or more varieties of a language with distinctly different functions (Sakurama Nakamura, 2025).

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In diglossia, there is a hierarchy among languages or language varieties, which are typically divided into “high” (H) and “low” (L) language categories. The H language is used in formal or official contexts, while the L language is used in informal or everyday contexts. In his classic study of diglossia, cited the example of Classical Arabic (H) and colloquial Arabic (L), where this functional distinction influences the social status of both languages within society. Diglossia reflects strong social and cultural stratification in multilingual societies (Ferguson, 1959).

Unlike diglossia, bilingualism and multilingualism refer more to the ability of individuals or groups to use two or more languages functionally without a strict division between the functions of each language. In bilingual or multilingual societies, individuals can switch languages depending on the context or the person they are speaking with, without being bound by strict social rules as in diglossia (Finlay, 2002). Research shows that bilingualism and multilingualism not only influence communication but are also linked to economic, political, and educational factors (Goriaa & Bellamyb, 2026). Bilingual or multilingual communities often demonstrate a high degree of linguistic adaptability in diverse situations (Cedden et al., 2025).

Code-switching is a phenomenon in which a speaker shifts from one language or language variety to another within a single conversation or specific communicative situation. Code-switching differs from diglossia because it occurs spontaneously and is not always governed by a strict division of language functions or status (Yim & Clément, 2021). Code-switching can occur in various contexts, both formal and informal, depending on the conversation partner, the topic of discussion, or the underlying cultural context (Doğruöz et al., 2021). This phenomenon reflects the flexibility of language, which allows speakers to adjust their language choices according to their communicative needs (Nazri & Kassim, 2023).

Studies on diglossia, bilingualism/multilingualism, and code-switching have important implications for understanding the relationship between language, power, identity, and culture. Language often serves as a tool for asserting group identity or social status, and variations in its use can reflect certain social values (Yahiaoui et al., 2021a). This research is not only important in sociolinguistic studies but also in the contexts of education and language policy, where a deep understanding of language dynamics can aid in designing policies that are inclusive and responsive to the multilingual needs of society (Przymus, 2024).

Given the complexity of these linguistic phenomena, this article will discuss the three main concepts diglossia, bilingualism/multilingualism, and code-switching in detail. This study will help explain how language functions as both a tool for communication and a symbol of social identity. Using theoretical approaches and empirical studies by several experts, such as Wardhaugh (2006), Ferguson (1959), and Grosjean (1982), this article aims to provide a deeper understanding of linguistic phenomena in multilingual societies.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach through a literature review of various sources, including theories from leading linguists such as Charles A. Ferguson, Joshua A. Fishman, and Carol Myers-Scotton (Zhong et al., 2023). This literature review focuses on analyzing the concepts of diglossia, bilingualism and multilingualism, and code-switching in sociolinguistics to understand the influence of social factors on language variation. Data sources were drawn from textbooks, journal articles, and other academic sources that discuss the development of diglossia, bilingual and multilingual code-switching, as well as phonological aspects of language standards (Wan Rusli et al., 2018). The data were then analyzed descriptively to identify patterns and relationships between language and social structure (Zhiganova, 2016).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Diglossia

The term “diglossia” comes from Greek and literally means “spoken in two languages.” In sociolinguistics, diglossia refers to a situation in which two distinct language varieties are spoken within the same language community. According to Sotiropoulos, the term diglossia was first introduced by a German linguist named Karl Krumbacher in his 1902 book *Das Problem der Moderner Griechischen Schriftsprache*, which discusses the nature, origins, and development of diglossia, particularly language phenomena in Greece and the Arab world (Umpornpun & Mongkolhutti, 2022).

However, another widely accepted view in the literature is that the term “diglossia” was first coined by a French linguist named William Marpais in an article describing the situation in the Arab world as *La Concurrence Entre Une Langue Savante Ecrite et Une Langue Vulgaire Parfois Exclusivement Parlee*. (William Marpais 1930:401) Several decades later, Charles Ferguson discussed four linguistic situations exhibiting diglossic behavior in Arabic, Modern Greek, Swiss German, and Haitian Creole. Ferguson also introduced a definition of diglossia that is frequently cited in recent research; whenever diglossia is discussed, Charles Ferguson’s name is invariably mentioned as a key figure in the field. The following is Charles Ferguson’s definition of diglossia:

A relatively stable linguistic situation in which, in addition to the language’s main dialects (which may include the standard language or a regional standard), there exists a highly distinct, highly codified superimposed variety (often grammatically more complex), which serves as the medium for major and revered works of written literature both from earlier periods and from other language communities that is learned primarily through formal education and used for most formal written and spoken purposes, but is not used by any sector of the community for everyday conversation (Yahiaoui et al., 2021b).

The term “diglossia” was first coined by Marçais in 1930 to describe the phenomenon in which everyday spoken Arabic dialects and Classical Arabic were combined and used as a language of communication in the Arab world. The Classical Arabic referred to here is the language of pre-Islamic poetry and the language of the Quran. (Abdul-Raof, 2013, p. 15) Diglossia was later reintroduced into the field of linguistics by Charles Ferguson in 1959 to generally describe linguistic behavior in which two specific language varieties coexist within a speech community. Arabic, Modern Greek, Swiss German, and Haitian Creole are classified by Ferguson as diglossic cases in which each language has two varieties: one is considered the superimposed variety and is called the high variety, symbolized by “H” from the word “high,” and the other is the dialectal variety, called the low variety, symbolized by “L” from the word “low.”

Taking Arabic as an example, classify Classical Arabic also known as Standard Arabic (*fusha*) as an H variety, while the everyday dialects spoken in various Arab countries, known as Colloquial Arabic (*‘amiyah*), are classified as L varieties. This classification cannot be discussed without considering the prestige or level of respect accorded to the language (Treffers-Daller et al., 2020). For instance, Classical Arabic is considered superior by nearly all Arabs, and this view is reinforced by the fact that this H variety is the language of Islam’s holy book, the Qur’an. Another reason for the prestige of Classical Arabic is that most of the highly regarded literature is written in this variety. In addition to prestige, diglossia can also be defined through a set of criteria that accurately draw a clear line between the two varieties of Arabic. These

criteria are acquisition, standardization, grammar, lexicon, and phonology (Ferguson, 1959; Kaye, 1970; Saville-Troike, 1982; Hudson-Edwards, 1984).

Table 1: Diglossia in Three Aspects of Language

Language	High Variety	Low Variety
Arab	"كيف حالك اليوم؟ أرجو أن تكون بخير" (<i>Kayfa haluka al-yawm? Arju an takuna bikhayr.</i>)	"كيفك؟" (<i>Kayfak?</i>) - "How are you?"
English	"How are you today? I hope you're doing well."	"Hey, how's it going?"
Indonesia	"How are you today? I hope you're doing well."	"How are you?"

The table above explains that in formal Arabic, the sentence uses Modern Standard Arabic to politely ask how someone is doing. In informal conversation, the form is shorter and simpler, just as in English and Indonesian. Formal sentences use a more complete and polite structure, while informal sentences are more relaxed and familiar (Pérez-Sabater, 2021).

Diglossia is a term in sociolinguistics that describes a linguistic situation in which two distinct language varieties coexist within the same language community. These two language varieties typically have different functions and social statuses. Generally, there is a "high" variety referred to as "High" used in formal or official contexts such as education, religion, or government, and a "low" variety referred to as "Low" used in everyday conversation or informal situations. The concept of diglossia was first introduced by the German linguist Karl Krumbacher in 1902 and later popularized by Charles Ferguson in 1959. Ferguson defined diglossia as a stable situation in which two language varieties coexist within a single language community (Matsumoto & Yoshida, 2026).

Characteristics of Diglossia in the H (High Variety) Variety: Used in formal, official, or literary contexts; typically more complex in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and structure. Not used in everyday conversation or informal social interactions. Often taught in schools or used in the mass media and by the government. L Variety (Low Variety) Used in everyday, informal conversation or among family and friends. It is simpler in grammatical structure and vocabulary compared to the H variety. It is used for more casual communication, but may vary depending on the social or geographic context ("Review of Bilingual/Multilingual Benefits on Cognitive Reserve, Executive Functions and Code Switching Cost," 2023).

Bilingual and Multilingual

The sociolinguistic approach to bilingualism and multilingualism differs from psycholinguistic and linguistic perspectives; sociolinguists view bilingualism and multilingualism as socially constructed phenomena and bilingual and multilingual individuals as social actors. For multilingual speakers, language choice is not only a means of effective communication but also an act of identity (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985). Every time we say something in one language that we could easily say in another, we reconnect with the people, situations, and power dynamics of our past interactions and embed our attitudes toward those people within that history (Huomo, 2021).

Through language choices, we maintain and reshape the boundaries of ethnic groups and personal relationships, and we construct and define "the self" and "the other" within broader political-economic and historical contexts. Thus, issues of language use that concern linguists and psycholinguists become issues of identity and social identification for sociolinguists. The concept of identity has undergone significant changes in sociolinguistics. In earlier variationist sociolinguistic works, such as those exemplified by Labov (1972), identity was defined in terms of socioeconomic class, gender, age, or the speaker's place of origin. It was assumed

that speakers revealed, rather than negotiated, their identity through their language use. Several scholars, such as Cameron (1990) and Johnstone (1996), later criticized this assumption and argued that identity is negotiated through social interaction (Goodman & Tastanbek, 2021).

In the 1980, the view that bilingualism consists of separate language abilities began to change. Grosjean (2010) emphasizes that bilinguals should not be evaluated based on monolingual standards, because bilinguals use language for different purposes than people who are proficient in only one language. This approach introduced the “principle of complementarity,” which suggests that bilinguals use their languages in contexts that differ from those of monolinguals. For example, a person might be more proficient in one language in a work context but use another language for family interactions (Pérez-Sabater, 2022).

Bilingualism and multilingualism are two concepts that refer to the ability of an individual or group to use more than one language. Although both involve proficiency in more than one language, there is a fundamental difference between them based on the number of languages mastered. These terms are often used to describe individuals or communities who use two languages in their daily lives. The first language is usually the native language (the language first learned in life), while the second language is one learned later. (Joshua A. Fishman, n.d.)

Multilingualism is the ability to speak more than two languages. In this context, an individual or group may speak three or more languages. Like bilingualism, multilingualism can involve a native language and several other languages, whether regional languages or foreign languages. Multilingualism is common in communities or countries with high linguistic diversity, where people interact using various languages depending on the social, cultural, or educational context. In Indonesia, examples of multilingualism can be seen in individuals who are fluent in Indonesian, regional languages (such as Javanese or Balinese), and foreign languages (such as English or Mandarin). (Indonesia and Selatan 2022)

The following table compares phonological aspects of bilingualism and multilingualism in Indonesia, focusing on the use of regional languages, Indonesian, and foreign languages.

Table 2: Phonological Aspects of Bilingualism and Multilingualism		
Aspects	Bilingualisme	Multilingualisme
Number of Languages Spoken	Two languages, such as Indonesian and a regional language.	More than two languages, including a foreign language and/or several regional languages.
Cross-Linguistic Phonological Influences	The influence of regional language phonology on the pronunciation of Indonesian. Example: regional accents or intonation that carry over when speaking Indonesian.	The influence of cross-linguistic phonology is more pronounced. Examples include an English accent carried over into Indonesian conversations, or pronunciation influenced by regional languages and foreign languages.
Consonant Pronunciation	Sometimes it's difficult to pronounce consonants that don't exist in a regional language. For example, the “f” or “v” sounds in Indonesian are difficult for Javanese speakers to pronounce.	The pronunciation of consonants can vary widely, especially when foreign languages are involved. For example, the pronunciation of the “th” sound in English is difficult for Indonesian speakers to pronounce.
Use of Accents	Regional accents may be more prominent in the pronunciation of Indonesian, especially in certain areas.	Accents can vary widely; for example, there are local accents (Javanese, Balinese) when speaking Indonesian, as well as foreign accents (British, Mandarin) used in international

		contexts.
Vowel Pronunciation	Vowels in regional languages often influence the pronunciation of vowels in Indonesian. For example, speakers of the Batak language tend to pronounce vowels with different stress patterns.	There are variations in vowel pronunciation; for example, in multilingual conversations, speakers may be influenced by the vowel patterns of regional languages or foreign languages they have mastered.

The table above shows differences in phonological aspects among bilingual and multilingual speakers in Indonesia. Bilingualism more often involves two languages with simpler phonological influences, whereas multilingualism can involve more phonological influences from foreign languages and various regional languages, resulting in more complex variations in pronunciation and intonation (Kumar, 2021).

Research on bilingualism has found that the perception and expression of emotions can differ between the first language (L1) and the second language (L2) for bilingual speakers. In general, bilinguals often feel that their L2 lacks the same emotional depth as their L1. This means that emotional words or expressions in L2 tend to evoke a weaker emotional response compared to when used in L1. An example in the context of bilingualism in Indonesia is a speaker who speaks Indonesian as their first language (L1) and English as their second language (L2). When speaking in Indonesian, emotional words such as “love,” “hate,” or “anger” may evoke a strong emotional response because this language is closely tied to personal experiences and the social environment from childhood onward.

However, when using English, the same speakers may not feel the same emotional impact when saying “love,” “hate,” or “anger.” These words in the L2 may sound more “neutral” and carry less emotional weight, since English is typically learned in academic or professional settings, which involve fewer deep emotional interactions than those found within families or local cultures. This phenomenon reflects Pavlenko’s (2012) findings, in which emotional reactions to words in a second language (L2) tend to be weaker compared to those in the first language (L1).

Differences in Multilingualism In Indonesia, many people speak Indonesian (the national language), one or more regional languages (such as Javanese or Sundanese), and a foreign language (such as English or Mandarin). Multilingualism here occurs naturally due to the linguistic and cultural diversity across various regions of Indonesia. Multilingualism enriches social interactions and provides cognitive and social benefits for individuals, as they can adapt to various communication contexts and understand diverse cultural perspectives. Many Indonesians can be considered bilingual or multilingual because they speak Indonesian as well as regional languages such as Javanese, Sundanese, or Minangkabau. At school or at work, they may speak Indonesian, but at home or with close friends, they may switch to a regional language (Bhatt & Bolonyai, 2022).

Multilingualism takes various forms, depending on the extent and manner in which languages are used, such as: Simultaneous Multilingualism: When a person learns several languages from childhood, for example, in a family environment where two or more languages are spoken. Sequential Multilingualism: When a person learns an additional language after mastering their first language (L1), usually due to academic, professional, or social needs. Functional Multilingualism: A person uses a specific language only in certain contexts. For example, an individual in Indonesia might speak Indonesian at work, a regional language at home, and English in academic settings (Cortés, 2024).

Code Switching

Code-switching is the act of switching from one code to another; thus, if a speaker initially uses code A (for example, Indonesian) and then switches to code B (for example, Javanese), this shift in language use is called code-switching (Suwito, 1983: 68). According to Ohoiwutun (1997: 71), code-switching is the transition from one language or dialect to another. Thus, code-switching is a phenomenon of language use that occurs due to situational factors and takes place between languages as well as between varieties within a single language (Aslinda and Leni, 2007: 85). According to Myres and Scotton (Piantari et al., 2011: 13), code-switching is the transition from one language code to another. If a person initially uses language code A for example, Indonesian and then switches to language code B for example, English such a shift in usage is called code-switching. According to Kitu (2014: 52)

Code-switching is one aspect of language dependency in multilingual societies; it is nearly impossible for a speaker to use a language in its pure form without making even the slightest use of another language or linguistic elements. From these relatively consistent descriptions of code-switching, it can be concluded that code-switching is the process of shifting from one language to another, triggered by specific factors depending on the given situation (Pérez Fernández, 2024).

Forms of Code-Switching

Soewito distinguishes two types of code-switching: internal code-switching, which occurs between varieties of the same language, and external code-switching, which occurs between the speaker’s own language (one of the languages or varieties in the community’s linguistic repertoire) and a foreign language (Saleh and Mahmudah, 2006: 85). Meanwhile, according to Jendra (Padmadewi et al. 2014: 64–65), who focuses on the changes in language that occur, code-switching can be divided into internal code-switching and external code-switching. Based on code usage, R.A. Hudson (Suandi, 2014: 134–135) classifies code-switching into metaphorical code-switching, conversational code-switching, and situational code-switching (Alrwaita et al., 2023).

Table 3: Examples of Internal and External Codes in Code Conversion

Context	Code Intern	Code Ekstern
Everyday Conversations	“Have you eaten yet? When I’m at home, I usually have sayur asam.”	“I had breakfast this morning—pancakes and coffee.”
Sports Discussion	“Tomorrow we’re going for a morning run in the park; meet at 6.”	“After that, we’ll do some stretching and a cool-down to prevent injuries.”
Vacation Plans	“Tomorrow we’re going to the beach for a weekend getaway.”	“Our itinerary includes sightseeing and a city tour of tourist attractions.”

Table 3 The example above illustrates how internal code is used in more casual or formal contexts related to local culture, while external code typically appears when foreign terms or concepts are more appropriate or specific for use in professional or formal contexts. This phenomenon demonstrates the flexibility of communication in multilingual societies. (Rose and Van Dulm 2011)

Code-switching occurs for various reasons and can serve different functions in social communication. Here are some of the main reasons why code-switching occurs: Adaptation to Social Context: Speakers often engage in code-switching to adapt their language style to the social context, such as shifts between formal and informal situations. For example, speakers may use more formal language in official

settings (such as at the office or in meetings) and switch to more casual language or a local dialect when speaking with friends or family. **Ease of Expression:** Sometimes, speakers feel more comfortable or are better able to express themselves. **Avoiding Confusion or Misunderstandings:** In multilingual conversations, speakers may switch languages to avoid confusion or to ensure that the message is conveyed more clearly. If there are terms or phrases that are not easily translated directly, speakers can switch to another language to express the idea more precisely. **Aligning with Social or Group Identity:** Code-switching can also be used to demonstrate social affiliation with a particular group. In multilingual societies, speakers may switch languages to signal their identity as part of a specific group or community for example, by using a local language or dialect that conveys closeness or solidarity. (Kaamiliyaa, Irawati, and Kuswardono 2023)

From the various perspectives presented, code-switching is viewed as a linguistic phenomenon closely related to social aspects, identity, and conversational context in multilingual societies. Definitions from several experts indicate that code-switching is not merely a shift in language, but also a way to demonstrate relationships among members in social interactions. The forms and reasons for code-switching demonstrate the important role it plays in adapting communication styles, facilitating understanding, and even reinforcing social identity in various communicative situations.

A key characteristic of code-switching is that it can occur spontaneously in conversation, without specific rules of usage as in diglossia. It is more about the flexibility of language use in a given context. **Example in Indonesian:** A college student in Indonesia might speak Indonesian when discussing a topic with a professor. However, when speaking with classmates from the same region, he or she might switch to Javanese or another regional language. For example: “This assignment is hard, isn’t it, Sir? I don’t understand it at all I wish it were just a little easier.” (Chen et al. 2018)

Ferguson was one of the first linguists to introduce the concept of diglossia in his famous work, “Diglossia” (1959). According to Ferguson, diglossia is a condition in which two language varieties or two different languages are used within a single language community for different social functions. One language has high status (high variety) and is typically used in formal situations, while the other has lower status (low variety) and is used in everyday conversation. (Ferguson 2017.)

Fishman is a sociolinguist who has made significant contributions to research on bilingualism and multilingualism. Fishman expanded on Ferguson’s concept of diglossia and linked it to issues of bilingualism, including the use of minority languages and their impact on education and cultural identity. His work helps us understand how language is managed in multilingual societies. (Joshua A. Fishman, n.d.)

Myers-Scotton is a leading figure in the study of code-switching and is known for her Markedness Model of code-switching, which explains how and why speakers choose certain languages in communicative situations. Myers-Scotton argues that language choices in code-switching can signal specific intentions or social identities, and demonstrates how social interactions are influenced by the language used. (Myers-Scotton 1989)

CONCLUSION

From the above concept, it can be concluded that bilingualism/multilingualism and code-switching are linguistic phenomena that play an important role in social communication and identity formation in multilingual societies. Diglossia highlights the hierarchy between formal and informal languages within a community; bilingualism/multilingualism reflects a flexible ability to adapt

language; and code-switching allows communication to be adjusted to specific social or emotional contexts. These three concepts demonstrate how language is not merely a tool for communication but also a symbol of identity.

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Author Contribution

Azizah Rahmah, Neli Asmaniah & Beri Nopriansyah: Writing-Preparation of original manuscript, Conceptualization, **Titi Fitri & Erlina Yulianda:** Visualization, Methodology, Improve Language, Investigation.

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