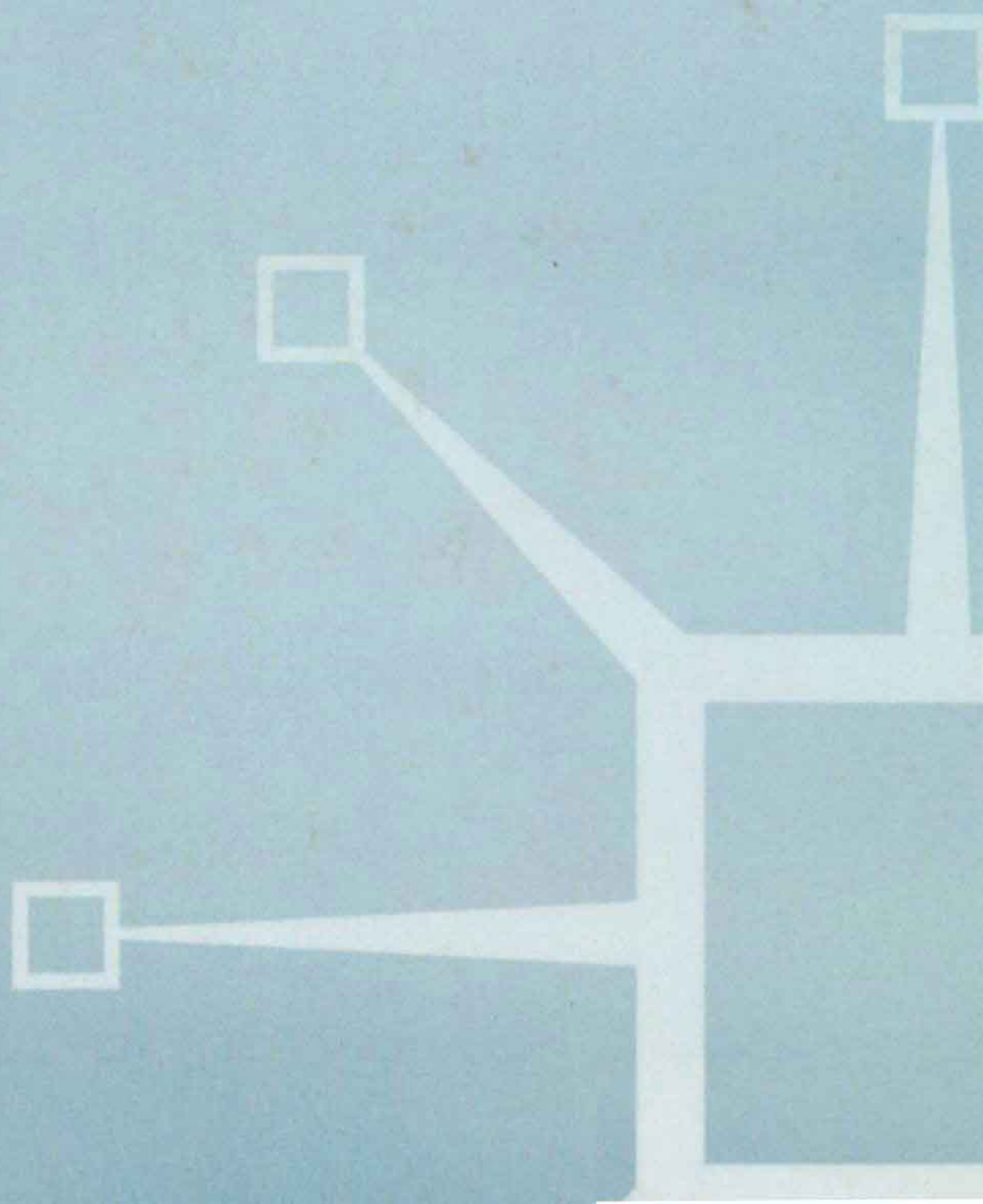Robert McColl Millar

LANGUAGE, NATION AND POWER
An Introduction
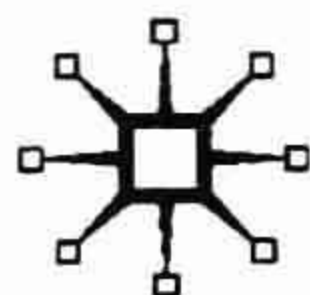
Language, Nation and Power

An Introduction

Robert McColl Millar
University of Aberdeen

palgrave
macmillan

Language, Nation and Power

Acknowledgements

Preface

Language is arguably the most human attribute we possess. Without language we would be unable to transmit complex concepts and learned responses across time. Our knowledge and experience would die with us. The complexity of human society and its historical development would be impossible without this facility. With literacy, the ability to transmit ideas and experience across space and time is increased and enhanced. In the office where I am writing this, there are books published in a wide range of places about a considerable array of subjects. The oldest book I have in my possession was published well over 150 years ago. Although I know (or at least have met) a number of the authors represented on my shelves, I am unlikely ever to meet most of them. Yet in some strange way I am connected to them through my having read what they wrote.

Yet language also acts as a means of dividing us. We are all faced occasionally with a situation where we do not understand the language in which significant events are taking place. For most of us, this is deeply frustrating, perhaps even humiliating. Sometimes those who understand the other language may be using that language to cut us out of active participation; generally, however, thoughtlessness or genuine inability on both sides explains what is happening.

In a deeper sense, however, language can be used as a means of excluding people politically, economically or even historically. There are considerable inequalities between languages. At present, I, as a native speaker of English, will immediately have access to greater resources of knowledge, and, no matter how poor I might be, economic and political power, than will a speaker of a major African language such as Hausa. Speaking of the nineteenth century, Mugglestone (1995: 70) has observed that '[l]anguage is an instrument of communication as well as ex-communication'.

This book, *Language, Nation and Power*, explores the ways in which language divides and unites us. It examines the means by which language impinges upon our identity as individuals, as members of a particular ethnic or national group, and as citizens of a given polity. The historical and social perspective to the use of language is particularly emphasized, paying attention to the nature and process of language planning and standardization. Essentially, this can be analysed as the interface between society, culture, history and language.

The nine chapters which follow discuss a range of interlocking themes. The first discusses the ways in which different varieties of language may interact within a society, and what this might tell us about the society itself. After this the concepts of *nations* and *nationality* are introduced, paying particular attention to the means by which language is used in their construction. Chapter 3 analyses a number of different ways of categorizing language varieties. What do we actually mean by words such as *language* or *dialect*? Chapters 4–7 can be seen as a unit, interpreting the nature and processes of language standardization and planning. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss and exemplify standardization, whilst the different forms and experiences of language planning and language planners are presented in Chapters 6 and 7. Chapter 8 gives more in-depth analysis to a number of rather different situations where language has been used for the purposes of nation-building. In Chapter 9, future prospects for the relationship between language, nationality and power will be discussed and a recapitulation of the argument of the book is provided.

Contents

List of Maps and Figures

Maps

Figures

1
An Introduction: *Diglossia* and its Aftermath

1.1 Fergusonian *diglossia*

Switzerland is one of the most developed countries in the world, with an affluent and highly educated population, speaking a variety of languages. The largest linguistic community is made up of German speakers. As with many mountainous polities, German-speaking Switzerland is divided into a range of different dialect groups, none of which is at all close to standard High German.

If the Swiss dialects were part of the English (or French) language community, it is likely that these language varieties would be spoken in their most *dense* forms (McClure 1979) only among people who had had the least access to education and its concomitant social mobility, or at least associated themselves strongly with a specific place and its value-system. The German-speaking world has generally been tolerant of the use of dialect in a range of linguistic domains by people from a range of backgrounds, however. This is particularly the case in Switzerland, where the level of linguistic distance to and from the standard (perceived as external both to the local district and the country as a whole) is especially great. Almost everyone who comes from a particular valley will speak essentially the same dialect. There is little or no social obligation to use the external standard in everyday life. Indeed, use of the standard in certain circumstances might even be considered offensive. If you were having a meal with friends from your neighbourhood in a local restaurant, for instance, it would be considered strange if you chose not to speak the local dialect (Weber 1984).

But there are occasions where the use of dialect would not be acceptable. A politician from your district, who would normally use the dialect you speak in everyday conversation, would be far less likely to do so in

the formal circumstances of the cantonal assembly or the national parliament. Most of your community would agree that this split is perfectly natural. Any attempt to alter these habits might be considered threatening and radical; it would certainly take a considerable effort on the part of the speech community (the linguistic community of which you consider yourself, and are considered, to form a part) to change the status quo.

Ferguson (1972 (1959)) defined such contexts as diglossia, suggesting that, on these occasions, a High variety (H) and a Low one (L) exist, 'with each having a definite role to play' (1972 (1959): 233). In his work, he distinguished this from both the alternate use of standard and dialect, and also from those situations where two separate languages were used 'each with a clearly defined role' (1972 (1959): 233).

As we will see, there are problems with both of these distinctions. In the first place, Ferguson's examples are largely those of a particular regional variety (in other words a dialect) with a diglossic relationship with a standard (whether local to that area or from elsewhere). He may have been thinking of the situation in parts of the English-speaking world, where, due to language attitudes, only some people are likely to speak the local dialect, rather than the near-universal use of two contrasted varieties he put forward. We will return to this point in our discussion of the views of Fishman.

Ferguson used the following situations to illustrate his views:

High	Low
Qur'anic Arabic	Vernacular Arabic
Katharevousa Greek	Dhimotiki Greek
Standard High German	Swiss German
Standard French	Haitian Creole

Some of the terms for language varieties used here are problematical. For instance, as we will see in Chapter 5, his distinction between *Katharevousa* and *Dhimotiki* as the High and Low varieties of Greek represents an elision, since the terms are normally associated with competing standard varieties, rather than mutually exclusive use by the same person of a High and a Low variety. Nevertheless, his definition of diglossia appears to hold water.

The first feature which he distinguished for diglossia was *function*. Either a High or Low variety is acceptable depending upon the purpose

of the use of language, as illustrated in this table:

Situation	H	L
Sermon in church or mosque	X	
Instructions to servants, workmen, clerks		X
Personal Letter		X
Speech in parliament, political speech	X	
University lecture	X	
Conversation with family, friends, colleagues		X
News broadcasts	X	
Radio 'soap opera'		X
Newspaper editorial, news story, caption on picture	X	
Caption on political cartoon		X
Poetry	X	
Folk literature		X

The absolute nature of these distinctions is questionable. Some preachers, for instance, might use a 'folksy' tone in order to get their point across, employing the low variety to make them appear closer to the people. Poetry may not always be the sole concern of the High variety, as the work of poets of the calibre of Mistral (for Occitan), Hugh McDiarmid (for Scots) or Derek Walcott (for Caribbean patois) demonstrates. With each of these exceptions, however, there are pertinent reasons why these disparaged varieties are considered fit vehicles for the expression of 'high' ideas, mainly associated with the histories and cultures of the areas in question.

The second characteristic feature of diglossia is *prestige*. Fasold (1987: 36) suggests that '[h]igh regard for H and its appropriateness for elevated functions outranks intelligibility as a criterion for the choice of dialect in these situations'. Someone may have limited ability in H, but still regard it as a more fitting and prestigious variety. In Norway, when the language of scripture and liturgy moved away from Danish towards more Norwegian varieties in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (as discussed in Chapter 7), many of the strongest protests came from people from the least Danicized areas, since, despite the problematical intelligibility of Danish, its prestige and appropriateness for such functions was unquestionable.

A central reason for this prestige is, in Ferguson's view, the possession of a *literary heritage*. Many language varieties may not have this. It is quite natural that speakers will take pride in the perceived antiquity of

their language, even if they have never read any elements of the literary heritage themselves. The possession of a literary heritage can also be used by the educational system to reinforce ideas of appropriateness and prestige. Naturally, modern print technologies have meant that a standard variety of a language may be the only one reproduced over wide areas within a language community; it is certainly difficult to have 'high' literature published in any other variety. At least two of the 'exceptions' to these 'rules' on the use of High varieties for 'high' literature discussed earlier possess a considerable literary heritage themselves. More features associated with this apparent discrepancy will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

The fourth feature of the diglossic relationship is the way someone acquires a particular variety. As a general rule, most people who live in a society, which has diglossia, learn L as a young child within their family. Conversely, H is generally acquired by 'artificial' means: native speakers learn the variety consciously, at school or in equivalent institutions, such as centres of religious teaching. Most people speak L; on the other hand, the 'artificial' nature of the learning of H may make an individual's command of that variety less than perfect, particularly when he or she has, through lack of formal education, little active experience with H, or L and H are particularly divergent from each other. Nevertheless, many speakers will believe that their perfect command of L in some way demonstrates the 'perfection' of H.

Part of this 'perfection' comes from the *standardized* nature of H, discussed in greater depth in Chapters 4 and 5. All languages vary across space. Thus, someone living five hundred years ago in northern England would have spoken a strikingly different dialect from someone from the south of England. Over time, however, certain varieties which form part of this *dialect continuum* assume prestige across wider expanses. More than one written form of a language might have existed; over time, only one remains. In general, it is treated as if it were the 'best', most 'perfect', variety. No matter how you speak, this will be the way you have been taught to read and write. It is also the only fully available means of communication outside your immediate area. All other varieties of the language are not regularized in this way: although you may speak a variety of this type more fluently, you will still consider this standardized variety to be superior.

Ferguson's fifth criterion is *stability*. As we have already seen, most members of diglossic communities tend to accept, mainly unconsciously, the status quo. Feelings of prestige for the High variety, and of homeliness for the Low, cannot be easily dismissed. Inevitably, there

will be some 'seepage down' of usage from H to L; the opposite does occur, but is unusual. For instance, educated speakers of Arabic may well pepper their colloquial usage with turns of phrase which derive from the classical variant. In those contexts where H would generally be expected, low usages would usually be avoided as being inappropriate, perhaps even *wrong*.

Nevertheless, diglossia can collapse. For instance, in late antique Western Europe the diglossic relationship between Classical Latin and the various regional forms which would develop into the Romance languages broke down. The economic and political crisis and collapse which we term the 'decline and fall of the Roman Empire' was a central cause, evinced in a precipitate decline in levels of literacy. New forms of diglossia would eventually develop for the daughters of Latin; there would also be a vestigial diglossia between Romance and Latin fostered by the Church. Yet even under these circumstances, this would have been limited by low literacy as well as the Church's desire for comprehension.

Part of this difference can be seen in the different *grammar* to be found for H and L. For instance, standard High German employs four cases with nouns, pronouns and adjectives, as well as two simple indicative tenses with the verb; Swiss German employs three cases and one simple indicative tense. These differences – which tend to show H as being more grammatically complex than L – demonstrate that non-standardized varieties exhibit change more quickly than standardized, since they are not subject to the conservative power of print. Native speakers, however, despite regularly making grammatical errors with H, will still consider H more 'correct' than the 'corrupt' L.

Ferguson's final categories refer to the use of the *lexicon* and *phonology*. Although from basically the same origin, many High and Low varieties do not employ the same words for certain items. In Katharevousa Greek, *inos* means 'wine', while Dhimotiki uses *krasi*. In everyday language, *inos* is used when asking for wine from a waiter, or offering it to a guest, while *krasi* is what you drink. Greater politeness is necessary when wine is requested or offered than when it is made or consumed. The first word derives from the Hellenic past, while the other is contemporary.

In Swiss German, in relation to standard High German, there is also a range of lexical differences, some (such as the use of *Velo*, rather than *Fahrrad*, for 'bicycle') due to the influence of the other languages of Switzerland, others from local usages. As striking are the phonological differences. Many Swiss German speakers would, in those situations where the Low variety is most acceptable, use the pronunciation /xint/ whereas, in the High contexts, they would say /kint/ for High German

Kind, 'child'; again, High German *Zeit* 'time' would be pronounced as /tsait/ in High contexts, but as /tsi:t/ in Low. Of course, most Swiss German speakers speak with a Swiss accent, but this goes far beyond this. The same phonological system is employed in different patterns depending upon the context.

This is, of course, common for speakers of divergent dialects. I use two pronunciations for the English word *house*: /həus/ and /hus/. These are largely socially conditioned, since I would not often use the latter in formal contexts, whilst it would be more likely in situations where I feel comfortable. This is similar to diglossia – indeed Scots could in the past have been seen as being L to English H – but not entirely the same. Because of the influence English has exerted over Scots (of which more in Chapter 5), English variants will occur in informal situations; conversely, because Scots has a considerable literary heritage and is associated with my country and culture, I do use apparently Low variants in High contexts. Swiss German is different, since a near-absolute distinction is made between the use of the two phonological systems: this is the essence of diglossia.

1.2 Broad diglossia

One of Ferguson's central contentions was that diglossia could only truly be present in a situation where varieties of the same language were spoken. This view was challenged by Fishman (1967). Fasold (1987: 53) describes Fishman's view as an example of *broad diglossia*. While Fishman agrees with Ferguson's general points about diglossia, he claims that the phenomenon *can* exist not only where classical (or standardized) and vernacular varieties of the same language are spoken, but also that different languages can serve different purposes within the same community. He suggests a dynamic relationship for diglossia with bilingualism. Fasold suggests (1987: 41) how different types of language use of this type could be laid out schematically:

		Diglossia	
		+	−
Bilingualism	+	1. Both diglossia and bilingualism	2. Bilingualism without diglossia
	−	3. Diglossia without bilingualism	4. Neither diglossia nor bilingualism

The first division, those contexts where bilingualism and diglossia interact, can be illustrated, as Fasold does, by the linguistic situation in (urban) Paraguay, where every local would agree that the High variety is Spanish, associated with formal and elevated contexts, as well as with external communication. Almost everyone would have some command of this language. On the other hand, a local language, Guaraní, is a major symbol of national identity, no matter your origin. It is almost unthinkable for a Paraguayan not to be able to speak this language. Nevertheless, Guaraní does not have the social cachet of Spanish. In fact, it fulfils the roles suggested by Ferguson for the Low partner in diglossia.

The second division suggested is one where bilingualism is present but not diglossia. Many Aberdonians are of South Asian origin. Many will maintain a language associated with their ethnic origin. The relationship between this language and the local vernacular, along with Standard English, is not diglossic, however, since, in the larger society of Aberdeen, and also within the minority community itself, no associations based on the social appropriateness of a language variety can be made.

The third distinction is where diglossia, but not bilingualism, exists. This might appear nonsensical, since it is difficult to imagine how a polity with two or more speech communities with little or no knowledge of each other's languages could be effectively run. It is possible, however. In a traditional Agrarian Literate culture, as discussed in Chapter 2, where the ruling class considers itself to be separate in behaviour, culture and language from the majority of the population, there will be little attempt on their part to learn the language of the ruled. There would, of course, have to be professional interpreters, or even, as in imperial China, a mandarin class of scholar civil servants who interpreted (and enforced) imperial edicts, composed within a conservative literary tradition, to the great mass of peasants (Grieder 1981: chapter 1; Smith 1994: chapters 3 and 4; Hsü 2000: chapter 3).[1] Interestingly, this absolute distinction may be played out in views on prestige and appropriateness even by the ruled. Social rules may be so rigid that certain situations which demand the use of H would actually be barred to most inhabitants, as was the situation in pre-Revolutionary Russia, where the ruling classes were often native speakers of French or German (no matter their ethnic origin) with little ability in the native language of the polity (Fasold 1987: 41). The same situation was probably in England after the Norman Conquest of 1066; it is reminiscent of the linguistic ecologies of many colonial and post-colonial states.

Fishman's fourth category is where only one variety is present. Whether this is possible is questionable: it would demand a highly egalitarian society, along the lines of those suggested for rural Madagascar by Keenan and Ochs (Ochs 1973). Societies of this type would have to be both anarchist (in the sense of having no rulers, leaders or elite class), and be small-scale, to exist. Since most of us live in societies which are structurally complex and organized hierarchically, it is difficult to imagine such a situation ever becoming terribly widespread.

1.3 Is diglossia universal?

Are all situations where there is variation in language depending upon social situation inherently diglossic? Let us consider the English-speaking world. Certain forms of language *are* more prestigious in certain contexts than are others. To equate this with Ferguson's diglossia is questionable, however. There is too much inter-penetration of usage between different levels to speak in these terms. On the margins of the English-speaking world this may still be possible – it was the case in Scotland until recently. Elsewhere, literacy, and the subtle (and less than subtle) homogenization in language associated with acquiring literacy have made true diglossia a thing of the past, however. That does not mean that social roles and contexts are not represented by language; but the contextual variation, which almost all English speakers exhibit, is more a matter of the use of different registers rather than true diglossia. Other societies which have a long tradition of language standardization and elitism, coupled with mass literacy, such as the French-speaking world, will also have gone beyond diglossia (Schiffman 1996: chapter 4).

This leads us to a central theme of this book. The last two or three centuries have produced unprecedented change in the relationship between language use and the twin concepts of power and nation. Who controls and guides opinion and decision-making? What does citizenship mean in an increasingly globalized environment? Where does language fall in all of this: what are its functions; how is it changed by its associations? What are the effects of changes in language function and status for speakers of both prestigious and disparaged language varieties? It is to these topics that this book is dedicated.