

Chapter 1: Introduction

“In Science truth always wins.”
 (Max Perutz, Nobel Laureate 1962)

*“I’ve never met a British person
 who understood what Australian English is.”*
 (Michael Clyne, 2010)¹

This publication is about pluricentric languages and the linguistic theory how these languages can be defined and described.

The nature of a pluricentric language is best illustrated by the following quotation from R.W. Thompson's paper about Spanish as a pluricentric language (in Clyne, 1992: 55).

Spanish is a language that has a contiguous linguistic area in South and Central America and is presently spoken in 21 countries. Thompson reports on the experiences of Alberto Escobar (a Peruvian linguist) during a trip through seven Spanish-speaking countries in 1975:

The distinguished Peruvian linguist, Alberto Escobar told me in 1975 that he once travelled by plane from his home city, Lima, to Quito, in Ecuador, Bogotá, in Colombia, Caracas, in Venezuela, San Juan, in Puerto Rico, Santo Domingo, in the Dominican Republic and one of the great cities in the USA, where Spanish is an important language. In each of these cities he was met by a local Spanish-speaking colleague and entertained by him during his visit. At his departure from the USA on his return trip he told me of his pleasure that Spanish really was one language and that slight differences in phonology, lexicon and syntax were more exciting topics for discussion than barriers to communication. On the return flight he stopped at the same cities but this time without guides and in each he spent his time strolling through the working-class suburbs and the traditional markets, sleeping in modest hotels and eating in popular cafes and restaurants. After this trip, he claimed, it would have been easy to believe that in each of the seven countries a different language was spoken, and each one unintelligible to the inhabitants of the next.

And Thompson adds the following:

Each of the twenty-odd Hispanic countries has its own linguistic norms some of which it shares with all the others, some which it shares with

some other countries, usually, though not always neighbours, and some which it possesses uniquely. This variation is often clearly evident in the speech of even the highly educated. It is, however, naturally enough in the written forms of the language that such variation become blurred. It is also the case that some countries have more than one standard spoken variety as in Spain itself. (R.W. Thompsons, in Clyne, 1992: 45f).

What can be concluded from this report?

1. Even though the language area of Spanish is contiguous there are substantial linguistic differences between the seven countries Escobar visited.
2. The second quote from the experiences and Thompson and Escobar clearly expresses that the linguistic differences between the seven countries are minor to marginal at the level of the cultural and linguistic elites.
3. The social tool of this group is (written and spoken) standard language, which the elites have acquired in a long process of training and with which they earn their living. The daily focus on the written language levels the linguistic differences between the speakers from different countries. Even though there are undoubtedly also many differences on the level of written language. This also characterises their attitudes towards language and language norms as well as their loyalty to the respective national norms, which is very often limited.
4. The general population however, does not use the (formal standard) language as a primary means for earning its living and in its everyday communication.

Escobar reports that the majority is obviously speaking *another language* than the standard language or parallel to it. This creates a so-called *diglossic situation* in which two or more languages/varieties are being used side by side. These (mostly) non-standardised varieties are often depreciated as *dialect, colloquial, patois* etc. even though they can be considered as languages in their own right.

This language situation leads to *formal standards* and *informal standards*. Diglossic speakers very often show great insecurity about the use of the standard variety and tend to devalue or even be ashamed of their native language norms. This will also be explored in a chapter about language attitudes in pluricentric languages.

5. Escobar says that it "may have been easy to believe that in each of the seven countries a different language was spoken, and each one unintelligible to the inhabitants of the next." And indeed the language of the so-called "ordinary people" usually is another language than the one of the elites which causes language conflicts as the elites are usually unwilling to accept non-standard varieties to be included in the formal standard.

Some fundamental terms to begin with:

Pluricentric language(s): A first definition of pluricentric languages (PCLs) could be that these are languages spoken and used in more than one political entity (nation, state, self governing region etc.) where they have an official function, which in the long run leads to linguistic and pragmatic differentiations that establish specific norms for each entity. This definition will be elaborated in the following chapters and it will be shown how complex PCLs are.

Variety / National variety: The specific manifestation of a language in a political entity that share the language. This term is neutral and refers to the specific features that are characteristic for the PCL in one of the political entities where it is being used. It must not be confused with the term "*dialect*" which usually refers to a non-standardised language variety that is restricted to a certain region.

Diglossia, a diglossic language situation: A language situation in which two languages or varieties of the same language are being used side by side. Their usage may differ depending on the language domain, leading to a so-called high language (formal) and low language (informal).

Summary:

In this chapter I have briefly tried to show some basic characteristics of pluricentric languages. These languages spread across several countries, develop their own linguistic features and can lead to a divided language usage depending on which social layer the speakers belong to.

In many pluricentric languages we find *formal and informal linguistic standards and a diglossic language situation* with a big difference between formal standard and informal standards.

And finally, there is a difference in the importance of language as a basis for livelihood and thus also a difference in language attitudes and language loyalty between the elite and the non-elite.

Footnotes:

- ¹ Personal communication by M. Clyne.