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Diglossia in the Sinhala Language as a Positive Feature

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Diglossia is defined as the situation where two very different varieties of a language co-occur throughout a speech community, each with a distinct range of social functions. Sociolinguists usually talk in terms of a High Variety (H) and a Low Variety (L), corresponding broadly to a difference in formality: High Variety is learnt in school, Christian church, Buddhist temple, Tamil Kovil, on radio programmes, in serious literature etc., and as a consequence has greater social prestige whereas the Low Variety is in family conversations, and other formal settings. The Sinhala language, which is spoken in Sri Lanka, is in a diglossic situation where the written variety differs from the spoken variety phonologically, morphologically, syntactically and lexically. Therefore they seem like two different languages. Thus the Sinhala diglossia creates many problems in using the written variety. In fact, students make great effort to learn the written variety and even writers face difficulties in using it. In order to overcome those difficulties the gap has to be minimized as some Sinhala scholars and linguists have proposed. However, there is another aspect of the problem. For instance, the spoken variety is heavily in the cord mixing situation and the final stage of cord mixing is language death. That is the reason for the commonwealth organization to name Sinhala as one of the dying languages in the world. However, the written variety is not changing and the classical Sinhala is preserved there and this study points out that the gap between the two varieties should not be minimized. The written variety should not be changed.

Key words: Diglossia, Language Varieties, Speech Community, Sinhala, Language Death