Multilingualism in Transition: Language Variation and Change in Gibraltar

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ABSTRACT

Before the border fence was dismantled on 15 July 2026, Gibraltar was already undergoing gradual language shift and linguistic erosion, as Gibraltar Spanish and Yanito declined in intergenerational transmission and everyday use while English consolidated its dominance in institutional, educational and professional domains. This study first re-evaluates the notion of diglossia in Gibraltar, proposing Gibraltar diglossic switching as a more appropriate description of local linguistic practices, challenging the separateness and discreteness of codes and offering insights into how varieties intermingle and mix in a structured, though not entirely predictable, way. It then examines whether a generational shift is taking place in the use of Gibraltar Spanish and Yanito. Using a qualitative, ethnographically informed sociolinguistic approach based on research stays in Gibraltar between 2019 and 2024, it situates its analysis within existing work on language variation, intergenerational shift and heritage language status. The findings highlight widespread concern about the erosion of Gibraltarian identity amid the decline of Yanito and Gibraltar Spanish among young people, particularly as British English gains ground in public and social life. The study concludes that Gibraltar's linguistic future hinges on the choices of individual speakers and local institutions, which may either maintain multilingualism as a core marker of identity or move towards English monolingualism and a more explicitly British postcolonial stance. In the new post-border context, it anticipates emerging forms of multilingualism, with English remaining dominant in institutions while Spanish and Yanito continue to be central to local identity, everyday interaction and cross-border relationships, even as Gibraltarians grapple with the ongoing challenge of protecting their community's ethnolinguistic distinctiveness.

Keywords: Yanito, cultural hybridity, Gibraltar diglossic switching, language death

INTRODUCTION

Gibraltar has undergone migration, linguistic contact, cultural interchange and political upheaval for more than three centuries, since Britain seized it in 1704. The closure of the frontier had a significant impact on the formation of a distinct Gibraltarian ethnic identity and on the blending of different cultural elements, producing a unique, dynamic culture that reflects its multicultural, multilingual heritage; likewise, the integration, dissociation and Yanitoism[1] movements have shaped language use across the population. From native Andalusian Spanish to British English, to a peculiarly nativised Gibraltarian English, and through periods of Spanglish and code-switching (Yanito or Llanito[2]), Gibraltar has now reached a point where there is a fear of becoming a monolingual, English-speaking society in which English is dominant and Yanito, a uniquely autochthonous ethnomarker, is in danger of extinction.

[1] Yanitoism, as we use the term, refers to Gibraltarian ethno-nationalism: a distinctive cultural and linguistic identity shaped by British, Spanish and wider Mediterranean influences. It emphasises the community's shared history and traditions, asserts its difference from both British and Spanish identities, and serves as a source of pride and a symbol of Gibraltar's distinctive heritage.

[2] Llanito/Yanito has evolved over the past three centuries under Gibraltar's diverse cultural and linguistic influences, including Genoese, Haketia, Arabic, Spanish and, more recently, British English, all of which have shaped this variety. In this study, we define Llanito/Yanito as Gibraltar's regional variety characterised by code-switching between Andalusian Spanish and English, and we use the spelling Yanito.

Gibraltar is at a crucial point in its language shift. Younger Gibraltarians are now mainly, or exclusively, English-speaking, while older generations routinely used Spanish, English, and Yanito. Although Spanish still features in education, the media, and cross-border communication, it is becoming a fragile community vernacular. This trend raises concerns about the future vitality of Gibraltar Spanish and the long-term sustainability of the traditional bilingual practices that underpin Gibraltarian identity. Recent scholarship increasingly portrays Gibraltar as a society undergoing profound linguistic change and transition (Salim Fahfouhi, 2024; Rodríguez García, 2024; Macdonald, 2024; Seoane, 2025; Suárez-Gómez et al., 2026; Feijóo Rodríguez, 2026, among others).

To put it differently, Gibraltar is undergoing simultaneous change in its three main ethnolinguistic markers: Gibraltar Spanish, Gibraltar English, and Yanito. Intergenerational transmission of Gibraltar Spanish is declining, British English has become the dominant language in both public and private life (Salim, 2024), and Yanito, although still symbolically important, is increasingly detached from the community bilingualism that historically sustained it. The key sociolinguistic issue is no longer whether English will remain dominant, but whether future generations will maintain meaningful competence in Spanish and preserve Yanito as a living bilingual repertoire rather than merely a symbolic marker of local identity. This is prompting growing scholarly concern about the future of Gibraltar's traditional multilingual heritage and the possible rise of a more exclusive Anglophone linguistic order.

In Gibraltar today, the younger generation can be regarded as heritage language speakers[3], with older generations being bilingual and younger people monolingual or effectively monolingual (Salim, 2026). They do not need to be descendants of immigrants who arrived in the host nation as minors or of those born there. They are part of Gibraltar's shared ethnocultural and linguistic community and inherit its cultural and linguistic legacy, even if they have little or no Spanish in their family background (such as the *Yanitadas*[4] or speakers of Yanito).

From a broader sociolinguistic perspective, Gibraltar is a striking case study in language shift, contact-induced change, sovereignty disputes, cross-border mobility and identity construction. It shows how geopolitical conflict, education policy, migration and globalisation can reshape a community's linguistic landscape over time, while also illustrating how ethnolinguistic symbols remain powerful markers of collective identity even as the social conditions that once sustained them undergo profound transformation.

This study adopts a qualitative, ethnographically informed sociolinguistic approach grounded in research stays in Gibraltar between 2019 and 2024[5] and continued visits through 2026. Drawing on sustained engagement with the local sociolinguistic context, it examines the relationship between language practices, language ideologies, borderland issues, and Gibraltarian ethnolinguistic identity, focusing on the changing roles of Yanito, Gibraltar Spanish, and English. The analysis distinguishes between shifts in intergenerational Spanish transmission (Brehmer & Treffers-Daller, 2020), changes in the use and sociocultural significance of Yanito, and the growing dominance of English in public and social domains.

These developments are contextualised in relation to existing research on linguistic variation, language shift, heritage language status and language death. Drawing on this scholarship, the article critically reassesses conventional models of diglossia and proposes Gibraltar diglossic switching as an interpretive framework for understanding the relationship between linguistic practices, language choice and identity in contemporary Gibraltar. This approach also considers the implications of these processes for the future of bilingualism and the maintenance of Gibraltarian ethnolinguistic identity.

The article begins by summarising language contact and the current linguistic situation in Gibraltar, then distinguishing between diglossia and Gibraltar diglossic switching in the Gibraltarian context. It proceeds to

[3] In this study, "heritage language" refers specifically to Spanish, in contrast with the dominant English used in Gibraltar's social environment.

[4] In our study, *Yanitadas* are lexical Anglicisms, following Pratt (1980: 246), or imported lexical borrowings, following Appel and Muysken (1987: 246). They are words or expressions that acquire a comic nuance when used at a distinctly vulgar level of language (Golpe Trelles, 1999: 206), and many of them have pronunciations distorted by strongly accented Andalusian Spanish (for example, Gibbons, 2010).

[5] For more detailed information about the methodology, see Salim (2024).

examine the contemporary linguistic transition and the use of Yanito among Gibraltarians. The final section highlights the alarming implications of the present linguistic landscape, notably the declining use of Gibraltar Spanish and Yanito among young Gibraltarians, and calls for linguistic revitalisation. The article concludes by synthesising the key findings and their significance for understanding the linguistic and cultural identity of contemporary Gibraltar in light of Gibraltar's recent border removal on 15 July 2026.

LANGUAGE CONTACT AND THE CURRENT LANGUAGE SITUATION IN GIBRALTAR

Gibraltar is a close-knit community because of its historical circumstances, its isolation from Spain, and its distance from Britain. Although the population is multi-ethnic, it remains united in resisting Spanish claims to sovereignty. The education system, together with historical and demographic factors, directly influences the use of English, Spanish, and Yanito in twenty-first-century Gibraltar (Kramer, 1986; Martens, 1986; Kellermann, 2001; Fernández Martín, 2002; Archer & Traverso, 2004; Levey, 2008; Picardo, 2012; Constantine, 2013).

Gibraltar's current linguistic landscape is shaped by its distinctive geographical, demographic and historical context. Situated at the southernmost tip of the Iberian Peninsula, bordering Spain and overlooking the Strait of Gibraltar, this British Overseas Territory occupies a strategic position at the intersection of European and Mediterranean linguistic and cultural networks. Its sociolinguistic profile reflects centuries of contact between English, Spanish and other Mediterranean languages, giving rise to Yanito, a locally distinctive variety characterised by code-switching between Gibraltar English and Gibraltar Spanish, alongside lexical borrowings and expressions from Genoese and other Mediterranean varieties, such as Haketia, Arabic Genoese and Maltese.

Although English is Gibraltar's official language, the territory's linguistic identity cannot be understood solely through the institutional status of English, as Gibraltar Spanish and Yanito have historically played a central role in everyday communication, family life and the construction of local belonging. The Government of Gibraltar's 2022 census, published in 2025, recorded a resident population of 37,936, of whom 29,072 (76.6%) were Gibraltarian, an increase of 17.8% since 2012. Among residents aged 14 and over, 87.6% identified English as their main language and 5% identified Spanish. Although these figures highlight the dominance of English in Gibraltar's current linguistic landscape, they do not measure bilingual competence, code-switching, or proficiency in Yanito. They nonetheless provide a useful demographic basis for exploring how linguistic practices, social identity, and cultural continuity are evolving within the Gibraltarian community.

Yanito is both a product of Gibraltar's colonial past and a marker of its enduring cultural hybridity. Shaped by the former dominance of Spanish as the main mother tongue, the subsequent spread of English, wartime evacuation to Britain, the closure of the border under Franco, and ideologies that link English with power and prestige, these developments have reshaped Gibraltar's language hierarchies and raised concerns about transmitting Yanito to future generations. They indicate a shift from active bilingualism towards greater English dominance, with consequences for intergenerational communication and for preserving local cultural knowledge.

The 2026 post-Brexit agreement between the United Kingdom, Spain, Gibraltar and the European Union marked a major turning point in Gibraltar–Spain relations. It abolished border and customs controls, eased movement for residents, tourists and cross-border workers, and removed the fence that had separated Gibraltar and Spain since 1908 (Jones, 2026). Given the closure of the border ordered by Francisco Franco in 1969, which disrupted long-standing social and economic ties until 1982, the agreement represents a shift from political division to a framework of cooperation, mobility and regional integration, while preserving Gibraltar's British sovereignty and constitutional status.

Of particular interest, the reopening and normalisation of cross-border interaction are likely to have significant sociolinguistic effects in Gibraltar. More frequent contact with neighbouring Andalusia may support the maintenance and transmission of Spanish, which has experienced reduced intergenerational transmission in recent decades. At the same time, increased mobility and social interconnectedness may generate new multilingual repertoires and contact-driven linguistic practices involving English, Andalusian Spanish, the

resuscitation of Yanito or a new hybrid form of Yanito, and the many other languages spoken in Gibraltar. Overall, dismantling the frontier may not only alter economic and political relations but also reconfigure Gibraltar's sociolinguistic ecology, fostering new forms of British–Andalusian multilingualism and cross-border linguistic hybridity.

Overall, it remains unclear whether recent socio-political changes will revitalise Spanish and Yanito or simply alter their roles within an English-dominant context. The emerging post-border situation is more likely to produce new forms of multilingualism in which English retains institutional dominance, while Spanish and Yanito remain vital for expressing local identity, supporting everyday communication, and maintaining cross-border belonging, even as Gibraltarians continue to grapple with how to preserve the ethnolinguistic distinctiveness that has historically defined their community.

BILINGUALISM AND LANGUAGE CONTACT: TRANSFORMATIONS OVER TIME

Gibraltarians are multilingual, regularly alternating between five main varieties. Yanito (or Llanito) blends Gibraltarian Andalusian Spanish and Gibraltarian English and is a valued, code-switched oral variety used in informal contexts. Standard English, the only official language of education, has a literary tradition and is used in all formal and official domains. Gibraltar English reflects growing independence from British colonial influence and serves as an informal spoken code in wider society, differing from other varieties of English around the world and shaped by multilingualism, Gibraltarian customs and ideology, as well as positive attitudes towards it. Gibraltarian Andalusian Spanish is the mother tongue of much of the population and is used in personal and economic relationships within and beyond Gibraltar. Standard Spanish has a limited role in education and is taught as a second language from the age of eight.

The historical, geographical, and political circumstances examined so far give this small area unique features, reflected in its language and making Gibraltar an interesting region for the study of language contact. Various authors have described Gibraltar's linguistic situation as a complex reality in which socio-psychological, sociocultural, and economic factors all play a role, helping us to understand the coexistence of Spanish and English, as well as the influence of other languages such as Arabic, Hebrew, Maltese, and Genoese (Salim, 2024).

When one considers Gibraltar's ideological and emotional context, its sociolinguistic situation appears far more complex. English represents Gibraltarian identity and serves to distance speakers from Spanish, a language that symbolises Spanish citizenship and culture (Neidig, 2008). According to Modrey (1998), Gibraltar presents a case of linguistic disloyalty: Gibraltarians prefer English because Spanish is perceived as incompatible with their political beliefs. The use of English establishes a political relationship with Britain. Kramer (1986: 63) states that "obviously in Gibraltar we find the opposite of language loyalty: the mother tongue is regarded as dangerous to the lifestyle the Gibraltarians have chosen". The case of Gibraltar can therefore be described as a language conflict. Spanish is the mother tongue of a large part of the population, but acknowledging this would bring them into conflict with the colonial government, which does not grant Spanish official status.

In Gibraltar's education system, English is the only medium of instruction and Spanish is an optional subject, mirroring the model in the United Kingdom. Children are treated as fully proficient English speakers from the start of primary school, although most speak Spanish at home, so Spanish is now used only to clarify explanations given in English. Beyond the absence of bilingual education in primary and secondary schools, students who wish to go to university encounter further difficulties because they cannot study in Spanish: English is the official language in both Gibraltar and the UK, restricting Spanish-speaking students' opportunities to continue their studies and creating a significant barrier to academic progress in both languages.

There have been many cases around the world in which bilingual peoples have been forced to abandon one of their languages, almost always the vernacular. They grew up believing that speaking two languages was

detrimental to personal development, and, worse, children were punished for speaking their mother tongue (see Martens, 1986; Fernández Martín, 2002; Archer & Traverso, 2004; Picardo, 2012). At the end of the Second World War, following the return of the civilian population, the British government decided to take drastic measures in the education system: "Emphasis should be placed on the uses of English as a medium of instruction through the whole school life" (Traverso, 1980: 102), thereby excluding Spanish from the educational context, as this local vernacular was not considered to be of a sufficiently high standard.

Moreover, the influence of Spanish through mixed marriages was constantly and clearly visible, and was countered by all possible means both in schools and elsewhere. This also appears to be the prevailing attitude among the population. English enjoys higher status at all levels, and the vernacular has not been taken into account in education or politics. This situation is not unique to Gibraltar; in all the former colonies of the British Empire, English has supplanted the vernacular languages (see Fernández Moreno, 1998: 220–221). However, in most cases vernacular forms are not so easily eradicated, and bilingualism persists, for in Gibraltar bilingualism is "part and parcel of the way of life" (Ballantine, 1983: 11).

For Ballantine, Gibraltar would be the ideal place to introduce a bilingual education system. The mother tongue should not be neglected but actively promoted. Ballantine adopts a linguistic perspective, arguing that Spanish should be taught as the first language because, when children enter school, they mainly speak Spanish (Fernández Martín, 2002). The public interpreted this as a demand that Spanish be taught as the first language, which led to a heated debate. Britto (1993: 52), by contrast, argues that establishing a bilingual education system in Gibraltar is not feasible because of the political and cultural connotations that might be associated with it. Gibraltarians do not want to be associated with Spanish until it is given the status of an official language. During times of heightened political tension between Spain and Gibraltar, for example, Gibraltarians tend to turn more towards English.

At the end of the twentieth century, the situation of bilingualism in education was described in Feliz Alvarez's MA dissertation, "Primary Code and Private Space Choice in the Host Classroom", in which he analyses the behaviour of teachers and students to identify clues about the role of Spanish in education (Alvarez, 1999: 5). According to the author, the process of linguistic immersion in English began when the child entered school with a much higher level of Spanish than English. During these years, the child developed a negative attitude towards Spanish, an "implicit or explicit perception that it is not desirable" (Alvarez, 1999: 37). Moreover, the teachers' situation was difficult, as they worked in a highly unstable socio-political environment and were reprimanded if they used Spanish.

However, by the time Kellerman (2001: 199–200) carried out her field study, the rules had changed slightly. The use of Spanish in the classroom was neither punished nor strictly forbidden. She describes a "structured immersion programme" in which teachers use Spanish in the early years and gradually introduce English to offset any disadvantages and to prepare children linguistically for the start of the curriculum at age five and above, with children in Gibraltar starting a year earlier than in Britain.

The multiculturalism and multilingualism of the Gibraltarian community are among the things it is most proud of. People of different ethnic backgrounds live in harmony and mutual respect in this small territory. However, the remarkable thing about this community, according to Fernández Martín (2002: 67), is that, of all the groups, the Spanish population generally does not accept its Spanish ancestry. On this matter, Martens makes the following statement:

> what they cannot acknowledge is the extent to which Spanish culture is a dimension of Gibraltarian identity. Those small groups who do explore and express this are the least popular political groups […] The necessity for a denial of 'Spanish' as an aspect of Gibraltarian discourse on identity is illustrated by what a number of Gibraltarians described as a typical attitude of Spanish women who had married into Gibraltar: "The Spanish women were shouting for the frontier to stay closed. They are more patriotic than the Gibraltarians, British or English." These women have clearly learned one dimension of their new Gibraltarian status. (Martens, 1986: 257-258)

On the Rock, it is inevitable that the use of language will, in certain circumstances, be understood as a political statement. It is still perceived as an expression of national identity. For some, being British and speaking Spanish at the same time is not a contradiction; for others, being heard and perceived as British can be a declaration of loyalty in a colony that asserts its British identity and strongly rejects any form of British disloyalty. Language is used carefully, and people adapt to each other's linguistic preferences and strengths. Although most Gibraltarians now speak both Spanish and English clearly and confidently (Díaz Hormigo, 2001), whether autonomously or interchangeably, they often choose one language over the other depending on the situation and context.

In this context, according to Martens (1986: 228–229), proficiency in English is the standard by which status and formality are measured, although Spanish is undoubtedly preferred by Gibraltarians as the language of social interaction. A stronger command of English or a British English accent can significantly enhance a person's prestige. In Gibraltar, there is a clear distinction in the social hierarchy based on a person's accent. The most esteemed accents are those of individuals who attended English public schools, while the least respected are those that sound Andalusian when speaking both English and Spanish. Even within middle-class households, there is a noticeable contrast between English school accents and Gibraltarian accents (Chevasco, 2021).

The stronger the Andalusian accent, the lower the prestige of speaking Spanish. Some Gibraltarians even speak Spanish with an English accent, but this is a very small group, and most Gibraltarians would be amused rather than impressed. The most common variety of Spanish is typical Gibraltarian Spanish, which is very similar to Andalusian Spanish, with some consonant variations and some scattered Yanito words. For Martens (1986: 232–233),

> popular Gibraltarian discourse on language defines the use of Spanish as 'bastardised', 'incomprehensible', 'secondary' and 'foreign', and places it in opposition to the 'proper' Spanish of Spain. In contrast to this the popular discourse on English defines it as the language of politics, education and prestige. Even the anti-colonial discourse, which challenges the primacy of English, demands a serious recognition of the bi-lingualism of Gibraltarians. Whilst Yanito humour recognises bi-lingualism, it remains at the level of humour, far from seeking official recognition. Thus, despite a Gibraltarian social practice which clearly indicates a preference for speaking Spanish in every permissible context, Gibraltarian discourse demands that we do not see Gibraltarian Spanish as in any way competent or serious. It is neither equal to Spaniards' Spanish nor to Gibraltarian English.

Although English is respected and used more often in official contexts, Spanish and Yanito still predominate in everyday interaction and at home, especially among older speakers. This situation is now changing: while parents and grandparents continue to prefer Spanish and Yanito at home, younger family members are encouraged to speak English whenever possible. After many years of contact with other languages, especially Spanish and English, a nativised variety has emerged, known in the literature as Gibraltar English or Gibraltarian English (Enriles, 1992; Errico, 1997; Cal Varela, 2001; Kellerman, 2001; Levey, 2008, 2015; Weston, 2011, 2013). Gibraltarian English, also called Gibraltar English, is a unique variety spoken as a first language by many Gibraltarians today, particularly older people. It differs from other forms of English, having developed through the incorporation of elements of Gibraltar's local culture, history, linguistic features and geography. Because of its growing prominence and distinctive features, it is regarded as an emerging "New New English" (Kellerman, 2001), although it is not widely spoken outside Gibraltar.

Gibraltar's English is changing as younger speakers increasingly shift from the traditional Spanish-influenced accent towards a southern British pronunciation, with Standard British English often regarded as more "correct" than the local accent or dialect. The local variety, originally exonormative and low in prestige, expresses local identity but is being reshaped through nativisation and contact with other languages, particularly British English, especially SSBE, a prestigious, neutral-sounding accent that is a modern version of RP (Salim, 2024). The extent of this contact, and the strength of its influence on usage, will determine how this emerging variety of English develops.

In summary, the bilingualism of English and Spanish has its roots in the English conquest of the Rock. Throughout Gibraltar's history there have been several changes in the population's language use and undoubtedly some degree of bilingualism. When two or more languages come into contact, there is usually a dominant language and a subordinate language. Many minority languages lose ground, and other languages gain ground at the expense of the less prestigious ones. In Gibraltar, Spanish and English have coexisted for more than three centuries. British English, the official language of the colony, is the main language in Gibraltar, but other linguistic varieties, such as Gibraltarian English, Yanito and Gibraltarian Spanish, are used in daily life because of the territory's unique geographical location.

DIGLOSSIA OR GIBRALTAR DIGLOSSIC SWITCHING CASES?

Diglossia arises from bilingualism or language contact and has been defined in various ways that are not universally accepted. It functions as an umbrella term for different varieties or dialects of the same language. In diglossic situations, language choice closely reflects social context, typically limiting speakers to a single code and discouraging code-switching. Ferguson's model of diglossia, however, does not apply to communities where code-switching is common. For instance, in Gibraltar there are conflicts between languages, dialects, and varieties, both at the level of the language system and in terms of social status.

Diglossia in Gibraltar suggests that the general pattern of unequal political and social status is related to how each variety was acquired: which variety was acquired natively and which was not; in other words, it relates to the dominant language base. The Gibraltarian speech community shows that there are no single-code speakers, that code-switching is a reality, that variability is inherent in language, and that code and style stratification are related to both social and political factors.

Gibraltarians demonstrate bilingual communication skills by speaking English, Spanish and Yanito. These skills stem from bilingual language use, socialisation and formal education within the Gibraltarian community. English is the official language on the Rock and is used in all formal situations, but the territory's geographical location, the widespread use of Spanish and the long-standing contact between English and Spanish, which has given rise to Yanito, make bilingualism unavoidable. This language contact has produced stylistic innovations and Gibraltar diglossic switching practices, so Gibraltar is one of the few communities that follows a clear pattern of diglossia. The situation has been described as 'bilingualism with diglossia' (Fierro Cubiella, 1997: 63–64), 'pseudo-diglossia' (García Martín, 2000: 488), or 'delalia' (Kellerman, 1996; Errico, 1997; Berruto, 2020).

Ferguson's (1959) research on diglossic communities establishes a link between language choice and situation. The high variety fulfils particular social functions and is used in domains that differ from those in which the low variety is used. A diglossic community is a relatively stable linguistic situation in which the primary varieties of the language coexist with a highly divergent and highly codified higher variety that carries a substantial and prestigious body of written literature. The high variety is largely acquired through formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes, but no part of the community uses it for ordinary conversation.

Yet Gibraltar differs from the diglossic community defined above in several ways. First, English and Spanish share many of the same social functions in Gibraltar, although English is somewhat exclusive in government, administration and education. While English is indeed the prestige language, there are situations in which code-switching or Yanito carries positive values, as it reinforces local identity. Ferguson also defines the diglossic community in grammatical terms, claiming that the grammatical resources of a high variety are significantly greater than those of a low variety. This is not the case, however, with English and Spanish, both of which have complex grammatical systems.

In other diglossic language situations, Fasold (1984: 44–50) distinguishes between 'double overlapping diglossia' (among English, Swahili and local languages in Tanzania), 'double interleaved diglossia' (between Hindi and the local dialect of Khalapur in India) and 'linear polyglossia' (within the Chinese community in Singapore), which together constitute three paradigmatic cases of 'multiple diglossia'. The same author lists

three types of linguistic variety, one high and two low, under the term 'triglossia', or three types of diglossia. There is also the so-called 'polyglossia', in which numerous varieties compete for supremacy.

The term 'triglossia' was already mentioned by Denison (1972: 66–67), who notes the presence of German as 'low', Italian as 'high' and Friulian as 'mid' in Sauris. It was also used by Marcellesi (1978) in relation to the situation in Corsica, by Hoffmann (1979) for Luxembourg and, more recently, by Youssi (1983) in relation to Morocco. Jardel (1979: 29) and Prudent (1981: 23–24) report a metaphorical use of 'tetraglossia' by Gobard (1976). Further terms include 'polyglossia' used by Platt (1978), 'hybrid multiglossia' by Peñalosa (1975) and 'schizoglossia' by Haugen (1962), who used it to refer to cases of linguistic uncertainty and insecurity among members of diglossic communities, or to situations in which two linguistic norms confront one another (Goebl, 1979: 32–35).

Let us be brief: in the diglossic linguistic communities mentioned above, there is greater uniformity among speakers. The functions that each variety fulfils are fairly well defined and the vernaculars, while not carrying any particular weight, nevertheless enjoy the loyalty of their speakers. In Gibraltar, the case is completely unique: there is neither uniformity nor loyalty to the 'low' variety (the local Spanish vernacular), which is the language of the other problematic neighbour. However, the 'triglossia' described by Fasold (1984: 44–52) would characterise Gibraltar. We would then have English as the only 'high' variety and two 'low' linguistic varieties, Spanish and Yanito. Even this model, however, does not quite fit, because Yanito is the sum of these two and not a separate language variety unrelated to the others. Berruto's (2020: 72–74) definition of 'dilalie' is interesting:

> […] a linguistic repertoire with a standard language and dialects that are clearly distinct and functionally differentiated, both being used in everyday speech and overlapping in certain domains; the standard language obviously enjoys prestige, and the use of the dialect tends to be socially discriminatory and socially stratified [...] One possible evolution of diglossia is particularly interesting, and that is the one that can lead to dilalia, namely when the role and status of the high variety change (and it is then the high variety that is promoted in language use); or it can lead to another situation where the low variety is promoted (when the low variety is increasingly used in formal language use and writing, as happens, for example, in German-speaking Switzerland).

Analogously, this applies to the current linguistic situation in Gibraltar, where English, the highly esteemed formal variety, is used alongside Spanish, the low-status local vernacular and socially stratified variety, and Yanito in everyday speech, with overlap across various social domains. Yet again, Yanito is neither a dialect nor a distinct variety.

However, it is undeniable that the situation in Gibraltar involves a degree of diglossia and multi- or bilingualism. Early research on bilingualism in Gibraltar focused on bilingual speakers' competence and the use of both languages in daily life (Lipski, 1986; Moyer, 1993; Fernández Martín, 2002), and provided a theoretical framework for later studies on diglossia in Gibraltar, that is, situations in which one language is used in particular contexts or environments because it is more prestigious than another (Marçais, 1930; Ferguson, 1959; Fishman, 1967, 1977).

Building on the concept of diglossia in Gibraltar highlighted by Kramer (1986) and Lipski (1986), Spanish appears to be more closely associated with family and communal contexts, whereas English is more often used in formal and political contexts. According to these studies, this diglossic situation is caused by political circumstances such as the official status of English, but it also seems to be influenced by historical and social events that led society to reject Spanish after the period of isolation (Lipski, 1986; Moyer, 1993; Fernández Martín, 2002; Levey, 2008; Canessa, 2019).

Lipski (1986) states that English is used in the following contexts: 1) when addressing a government official; 2) when addressing a clerk or receptionist; 3) when addressing a foreigner or tourist who is clearly not from Spain; and 4) in any situation that enhances the speaker's prestige or status. At the time of his study, very few Gibraltarians did not speak Spanish, and Spanish was the language of daily use in most Gibraltarian households, sometimes alongside English. It is natural for Spanish-born Gibraltarian couples to speak Spanish,

but the most remarkable aspect of Gibraltar's linguistic environment is that even native-born Britons who move to Gibraltar often adopt Spanish as a natural consequence of living in the colony, and that their children learn the language with ease.

In many communicative situations today, the idealised view of English and Spanish as functionally complementary varieties needs to be reconsidered. This view is idealised because it does not reflect the constant change and increasing permeability between these varieties, nor the dramatic social changes that have taken place in contemporary Gibraltar. Owing to the sustained contact between the two varieties, and between Spanish and English as the colonial language, the linguistic situation in Gibraltar has always been characterised by flux.

Over time, support for general education, accessibility, and English proficiency has increased. English is no longer confined to a privileged, educated elite. Moreover, social change and rising literacy rates have necessitated new uses for different varieties –British English, Gibraltarian English, Andalusian Spanish, Standard Spanish, and Yanito– leading to increasing overlaps (and thus significant leakage) between these varieties, as well as changes in attitudes towards their use in written and oral forms.

In Gibraltar, code-switching can function as level switching in political contexts: politicians use British English in public speeches to convey abstract, idealised or metaphorical messages, while Gibraltarian Spanish or Yanito is reserved for concrete, physical matters and is strongly associated with the personalisation of issues. Pragmatic functions such as satire and irony add a creative dimension to code-mixing, which also operates as a discourse strategy in monologues and has been observed in classroom settings (Salim, 2024).

Although accommodation, or stylistic convergence, is usually expected, there are instances of non-accommodation in which two educated speakers consistently maintain standard and colloquial varieties respectively. This highlights the asymmetrical status of the Gibraltar varieties and suggests that the pattern of asymmetrical conditioning is linked to how each was acquired –whether natively or non-natively– reflecting the principle of the prevalent or dominant language.

Returning to the term "diglossia", as used in the context of Gibraltar, reveals that it oversimplifies a more nuanced reality. Diglossia should not be seen as a problem, but as an undervalued form of richness. It can be understood as a contact zone in which different language varieties continually shape one another and generate new spaces for convergence and divergence. This perspective highlights the dynamic interaction and exchange among varieties of English (British and Gibraltarian) and Spanish (Andalusian and Castilian), rather than relying on notions of intrusion or code superiority, and enables the examination of contingent, hybrid, contested, and performative forms of language.

A contemporary sociolinguistic reconceptualisation of diglossia in Gibraltar clarifies how social factors shape the negotiation, redefinition, redrawing, and reproduction of boundaries between British English, Gibraltarian English, and the different Spanish dialects. This perspective does not oppose the study of linguistic systems or structures but necessarily complements it. In this study, a more appropriate designation for this phenomenon is arguably Gibraltar diglossic switching, referring to the alternating use of British English, Gibraltar English, and the Gibraltar Spanish dialect. It involves the alternating use of community codes, such as Andalusian Spanish and Gibraltar English, alongside British English as the dominant code. The presence of this dominant variety significantly influences the roles of the codes involved, particularly in insertional and combinatory switching patterns. The functions and motivations underpinning Gibraltar diglossic switching are analogous to those observed in other bilingual switching communities. Beyond lexical borrowing to remedy gaps in vocabulary, these switches often serve pragmatic, social, and stylistic purposes.

The definition of diglossia should be broadened to include communities that use multiple languages, dialects, or stylistic variations both within the same language and across different languages. Rethinking and reconceptualising diglossia raises a number of issues that need to be addressed and thoroughly researched. The context of language use is far more complex than a simple dichotomy between two distinct poles, as in the case of speakers in Gibraltar. In fact, the two poles –English and Spanish– do not exist in isolation but interact along a continuum of possible variations. Language use is influenced by a number of extralinguistic factors,

such as the environment, situation, topic, language proficiency, the emotional state of the speakers, the number of participants, and the function of the discourse. Each of these variables affects the language used, making language use in Gibraltar extremely nuanced and dynamic.

Overall, the term diglossia offers only a simplistic understanding of the situation, whereas in reality the context and the variables at play are far more complex and multilayered. In Gibraltar, what scholars call diglossia can in fact be described as Gibraltar diglossic switching. The complex interactions between English and Spanish cannot be captured merely by the idealised paradigm or the ill-defined concept of diglossia, nor can they be reduced simply to the valorisation or devaluation of one's own language. Like classic bilingualism and code-switching, Gibraltar diglossic switching is socially motivated and structurally conditioned, and is also a genuine source of pleasure that Gibraltar bilinguals enjoy.

THE DECLINING USE OF SPANISH AND YANITO AMONG YOUNG GIBRALTARIANS: A CALL FOR LINGUISTIC REVITALISATION

The declining use of Spanish and Yanito among younger Gibraltarians can be situated within wider sociolinguistic debates on intergenerational language shift, ethnolinguistic vitality and community-based language revitalisation. Social and educational policies, combined with historical and political circumstances, particularly during and after the blockade, have deepened the native population's resentment of Spain and strengthened its preference for Britain. At the same time, the shift towards English in Gibraltar is so pronounced that Spanish and other minority languages are now rarely used and are being abandoned. The expansion of anglicised language cultures has further shaped children's language practices and choices at home, in education, in wider society and in the labour market.

Consequently, the loss of Spanish –formerly the community's main mother tongue and now the second most important language after English– is already widespread among Gibraltar's youth. Historical and socio-political changes in Gibraltar have significantly reshaped the territory's demographic and sociolinguistic landscape, with Spanish as the principal linguistic casualty. The imposition of English language ideologies – particularly in the community, in educational institutions and in the workplace, which are key sites of socialisation for young Gibraltarians– has severely disrupted the transmission of Spanish, making it increasingly common for Gibraltarian families to raise children who do not speak their heritage language.

Spanish and Yanito urgently need revitalisation. Teaching these local ethnolinguistic markers as heritage languages in Gibraltar's schools would enable educators and policymakers to treat multilingualism as an asset rather than a threat to English or to the 'Britishness' of Gibraltar's multilingual children. However, approving such programmes is complex and depends on substantial government and community support, which has historically been viewed as undesirable and politically taboo. At present, the Gibraltar government refuses to take the initiative to make schools bilingual, insisting that teaching remains in English because pupils are assessed through the General Certificate of Secondary Education in English, as John Cortes, Gibraltar's Minister for Education, explains (Cañas, 2023).

Yet comparative evidence from other minority-language contexts shows that reversing language shift requires coordinated action at both community and institutional levels. In the Basque Autonomous Community, Apodaka et al. (2024) document a move towards collaborative governance in language revitalisation, while Gondra (2025) examine how standardisation and revitalisation ideologies can affect speakers of traditional Basque varieties. These findings highlight the importance of supporting everyday linguistic practices rather than focusing exclusively on formal language learning. Similarly, research on Welsh language policy emphasises the need to connect government strategies with community needs and broader socio-economic conditions (Lewis, 2021).

Further evidence comes from *Sámi* communities in Norway and Sweden, where Lloyd-Smith et al. (2023), drawing on survey data from 5,416 participants, identify substantial intergenerational declines in language use and differences linked, at least in part, to national policy environments. Their findings highlight the need for accessible language education, adequate funding, and greater opportunities to use minority languages in family and community settings. The revitalisation of *te reo Māori* in Aotearoa New Zealand also illustrates the

importance of community-led initiatives, particularly *Kōhanga Reo* (language nests), which promote early childhood language transmission and strengthen connections between language, culture, and community (McClutchie Mita, 2021).

Although these contexts differ from Gibraltar in their history, geography, colonial records, language structures and political circumstances, they offer a valuable comparative lesson: linguistic vitality depends not only on speakers' knowledge of a language but also on whether they have meaningful opportunities and social incentives to use it. In Gibraltar, this underscores the need for a locally informed revitalisation strategy that combines initiatives for intergenerational transmission, youth-centred cultural and digital projects, educational engagement and sustained public support, while recognising the linguistic diversity and identities of younger Gibraltarians.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Gibraltar's linguistic make-up is complex, shaped by historical, social and political ties. Language change there has been a continuous process, strongly influenced by events such as the Napoleonic Wars, the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War and, above all, the closure of the Spanish–British border between 1969 and 1982, which greatly accelerated it. Initiated by those who lived through the blockade, whether as an expression of loyalty or because of reduced contact with Spanish, this change is most clearly visible and firmly established in the language of their young people.

Language in Gibraltar, as in other multilingual communities, is a sensitive issue because it is closely tied to identity. In contemporary Gibraltar, questions about mother tongue or first language can provoke intense debate. Gibraltar's population is a multicultural and multiracial mix, including British, Spanish, Menorcan, Genoese, Maltese, Jewish, Hindu, and Moroccan communities, although British and Spanish influences have been predominant. These various groups have made an undeniable contribution to the cultural, economic, and linguistic development of the people of Gibraltar.

Gibraltarians are very proud of their identity and committed to protecting it. They distinguish themselves from the Spanish and the British through Gibraltar diglossic switching. However, Gibraltar now fears losing its identity, as Yanito declines while English becomes increasingly dominant and socially important. The younger generation speaks little or no Yanito, even though they study Spanish at school. Because formal Spanish is not required for education, employment or most administrative tasks, young Gibraltarians' ability to speak and write Spanish is decreasing. The study draws attention to this alarming trend towards English monolingualism and a cross-generational language shift affecting Gibraltar Spanish and Yanito. Older people speak Spanish with one another but switch to English when speaking to children, causing a major language shift and, in many cases, making it impossible for grandparents and grandchildren to communicate because they no longer share a common language.

Younger generations in Gibraltar favour English in family communication even when elders and adults address them in Spanish and Yanito, and among themselves young people also prefer English. These patterns suggest a move away from active bilingual practices towards stronger English dominance, with consequences for intergenerational communication and for the transmission of local cultural knowledge. In these circumstances, Spanish and Yanito can be regarded as endangered languages that require immediate local government intervention, educational measures, positive public attitudes, and sustained efforts to revitalise and preserve Spanish and Yanito oral traditions and to develop their written use. The future of these two ethnolinguistic markers will ultimately depend on how far Gibraltar can accommodate the growing predominance of English while maintaining the multilingual practices through which its distinctive cultural and linguistic identity has historically been shaped.

The implementation of the 2026 post-Brexit agreement and the removal of the Gibraltar–Spain border barrier will, it is to be hoped, create favourable conditions for maintaining Spanish in Gibraltar, while fostering new multilingual practices and forms of linguistic hybridity through intensified contact between English, Andalusian Spanish and Yanito.

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