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## Yiddish language socialization across communities: Religion, ideologies, and variation



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## ABSTRACT

This review article analyzes key themes and trends in recent research on Yiddish language socialization. It considers the use of Yiddish within a multilingual repertoire across communities, highlighting the positive contributions of ethnographic literature in particular. Specifically, it demonstrates how degree of religious affiliation and language contact in diverse communities can play a role in Yiddish language use. The article also examines the central role of language ideologies and language learning motivations among those who learn, learn about, and/or use Yiddish. The discussion illuminates individuals' and groups' cross-cutting identities, hybrid forms of language, and creativity in language use across contexts.

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*Di tsung iz di feder fun hartsn.*

The tongue is the pen of the heart.

[Yiddish proverb]

## 1. Introduction

This special issue focuses on the multiple ways that elements of ethnic, cultural, religious, and regional identity are connected to language use patterns in diverse contexts. Yiddish, as a Jewish language in the contemporary world, provides a compelling case study of cross-cutting cultural and religious ideologies, as seen through language socialization and language practices of various communities. Language socialization research (Duranti et al., 2012; Garrett and Baquedano-Lopez, 2002; Ochs and Schieffelin, 1984; Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986) has focused on “socialization to use language and socialization through the use of language” (Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986, 163). Ochs and Schieffelin (1984) emphasize,

the process of acquiring language is deeply affected by the process of becoming a competent member of a society [and] the process of becoming a competent member of society is realized to a large extent through language, by acquiring knowledge of its functions, social distribution, and interpretations in and across socially defined situations, i.e., through exchanges of language in particular social situations. (p. 264)

Over time, Jews have spoken in ways that are distinct from their non-Jewish neighbors (Peltz, 2010). Jewish languages have more recently been considered “a distinctively Jewish repertoire rather than a separate system” (Benor, 2008, p. 1062). And a

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Jewish religiolect is “a spoken and/or written variety employed by the Jewish population of a specific area, although it later may extend to other communities and areas as well” (Hary and Wein, 2013, p. 88). Like other religiolects, Yiddish and its use can also be analyzed for their relationships to communities along the religious-secular spectrum.

Yiddish (meaning “Jewish” in Yiddish), spoken primarily by Ashkenazic (Western, Central, and Eastern European) Jews, originated in the 11th century in the middle Rhine area (Fishman, 1991, p. 81). It arose as a result of contact between Jews’ L1 (which many believe was Aramaic) and German, and continued to develop as Jews settled in different areas across the globe. Yiddish has moved with Jews to areas around the world, including Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, North and South America, and Israel. As a result, the Yiddish language itself has incorporated both lexical and grammatical aspects of a variety of languages from these regions. Davis (1987, p. 159) notes, “the Yiddish of Eastern Europe has a basic Germanic structure, and predominantly Germanic vocabulary with a high input of Slavic and Hebrew and Aramaic words and is written in the Hebrew script”.

Due to a variety of events during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the number of Yiddish speakers within non-Orthodox Jewish communities has greatly diminished. These events include the Holocaust, during which six million Jews perished (it is estimated that approximately five million of these were Yiddish speakers (Lipphardt, 2011)); the migration to and partial assimilation of large numbers of Jews in the United States, Israel, South America, and other countries; and the state of Israel’s choice of Hebrew over Yiddish or other Jewish languages as the official language of the nation. However, within some Orthodox Hasidic communities the number of speakers is in fact growing (Assouline, 2010; Barriere, 2010). The contemporary picture of Yiddish language socialization is therefore a multifaceted one, necessitating detailed examination of language ideologies and practices across contexts.

## 2. Yiddish as part of a multilingual repertoire: recent research

A number of recent books and dissertations have treated the complexity of Yiddish as part of a repertoire of languages in the contemporary age, including *Becoming Frum: How Newcomers Learn the Language and Culture of Orthodox Judaism* (Benor, 2013), *Choosing Yiddish: New Frontiers of Language and Culture* (Rabinovitch et al., 2013), *Heritage language socialization practices in secular Yiddish educational contexts: The creation of a metalinguistic community* (Avineri, 2012), and *Twenty-First Century Yiddishism* (Soldat-Jaffe, 2012). These all build on previous seminal work on the topic, including the in-depth ethnography *Mitzvah Girls* (Fader, 2009) that focused on language socialization among Orthodox Hasidic teenage girls in Brooklyn, and *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language & Culture* (Shandler, 2008) that considers the cultural and linguistic purposes to which Yiddish is put by Jews and non-Jews alike. He highlights Yiddish as a “postvernacular” language, defined by the following: “in semiotic terms, the language’s primary level of signification – that is, its instrumental value as a vehicle for communicating information, opinions, feelings, ideas – is narrowing in scope. At the same time its secondary, or meta-level of signification – the symbolic value invested in the language apart from the semantic value of any given utterance in it – is expanding” (Shandler, 2008, p. 4). These works explore in depth some of the crucial features that can shape language use, including region, degree of religious observance, and language attitudes and ideologies, which are discussed in detail in the articles in this issue. All of this contemporary research on Yiddish language ideologies and practices highlight the centrality of the following social features: **1) degree of religious affiliation and language contact in diverse communities** and **2) language ideologies and language learning motivations**. These books employ a wide range of methodologies, including written sources from a variety of contexts and time periods, surveys/questionnaires, interviews, and ethnographic participant-observation. Across all of these studies, it becomes evident that detailed ethnographic and discourse analysis provide a deep perspective on language socialization, language ideologies, and diverse practices across communities (cf. Fader, 2009; Benor, 2012; Avineri, 2012). These methods can allow readers to grasp how different groups negotiate the complexities of use and/or talk about Yiddish among a constellation of other languages. Written sources, including literature, dictionaries, and media, can be analyzed using content analysis and other analytical forms to provide a complement to more interaction-based analyses (cf., Soldat-Jaffe, 2012; Rabinovitch et al., 2013). Ethnographic interaction-based methods, along with large-scale surveys, can provide a profound view of groups’ language ideologies and use.

*Becoming Frum: How Newcomers Learn the Language and Culture of Orthodox Judaism* (Benor, 2012) discusses the second language socialization processes of non-Orthodox Jews who become religious later in life, and the ways they demonstrate their emerging identities through diverse linguistic features, practices, affiliations, and ideologies. *Heritage language socialization practices in secular Yiddish educational contexts: The creation of a metalinguistic community* (Avineri, 2012) takes an ethnographic approach to analyzing Yiddish classrooms, cultural events, and festivals to develop a theoretical and empirical framework for the model of “metalinguistic community”, a community of positioned social actors engaged primarily in discourse about language and cultural symbols tied to language. *Twenty-First Century Yiddishism* (2012), by Tatjana Soldat-Jaffe, provides a historical and contemporary perspective on the complex set of changing language ideologies related to Yiddish pedagogy and use since the beginning of the twentieth century. *Choosing Yiddish: New Frontiers of Language and Culture* (Rabinovitch et al., 2013) is an edited volume that considers the variety of novel approaches to Yiddish in the nineteenth through twenty-first centuries, including music, literature, and other forms of language use.

## 3. Degree of religious affiliation & language contact in diverse communities

In reviewing current research on Yiddish, it becomes evident that degree of communal religious affiliation can have a heavy influence on sociophonetic choices: language is used distinctively by those along a *spectrum* of religious observance

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