Innovation and Change in the New York Hasidic Yiddish Pronominal System

Chaya R. Nove
The Graduate Center at City University of New York

Contact:
Website: chayarnove.com
Email: chayarnove@gmail.com

THE GRADUATE CENTER
CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Introduction

Focus: Synchronic variation/innovation in the New York Hasidic Yiddish (HY) pronominal system

Two **leveling** processes:
1. ACC/DAT distinction singular paradigm
   mir (1SG) & *dir* (2SG) → *mikh* & *dikh*
2. Verbal agreement morpheme in plural paradigm
   -mir (with 1PL) & *-ts* (with 2PL) → *-(e)n*

conservative →

person	nom	acc	dat	v. agreement	reflexive
1SG	ikh	mikh	**mir**	-Ø	mikh
2SG	du	dikh	**dir**	-st	dikh
3SG	er/zi	im/ir	im/ir	-t	zikh
1PL	undz	undz	undz	**-mir**	zikh
2PL	**ets**	enk	enk	**-ts**	**enk**
3PL	zey	zey	zey	-(e)n	zikh

Examples:
*Leah vayzt **mir** a bild*
'Leah shows me a picture'

*Undz ze**mir** nisht mid*
'We are not tired'

innovative →

person	nom	acc	dat	v. agreement	reflexive
1SG	ikh	mikh	**mikh**	-Ø	mikh
2SG	du	dikh	**dikh**	-st	dikh
3SG	er/zi	im/ir	im/ir	-t	zikh
1PL	undz	undz	undz	**-(e)n**	zikh
2PL	**enk**	enk	enk	**-(e)n**	**zikh**
3PL	zey	zey	zey	-(e)n	zikh

Examples:
*Leah vayzt **mikh** a bild*
'Leah shows me a picture'

*Undz ze**nen** nisht mid*
'We are not tired'

New York Hasidic Yiddish

Native language of 135K to 300K Hasidic Jews in New York:

- Orange County:
  - Kiryas Joel

- Rockland County:
  - Monsey
  - Spring Valley
  - New Square

- Brooklyn:
  - Williamsburg
  - Borough Park
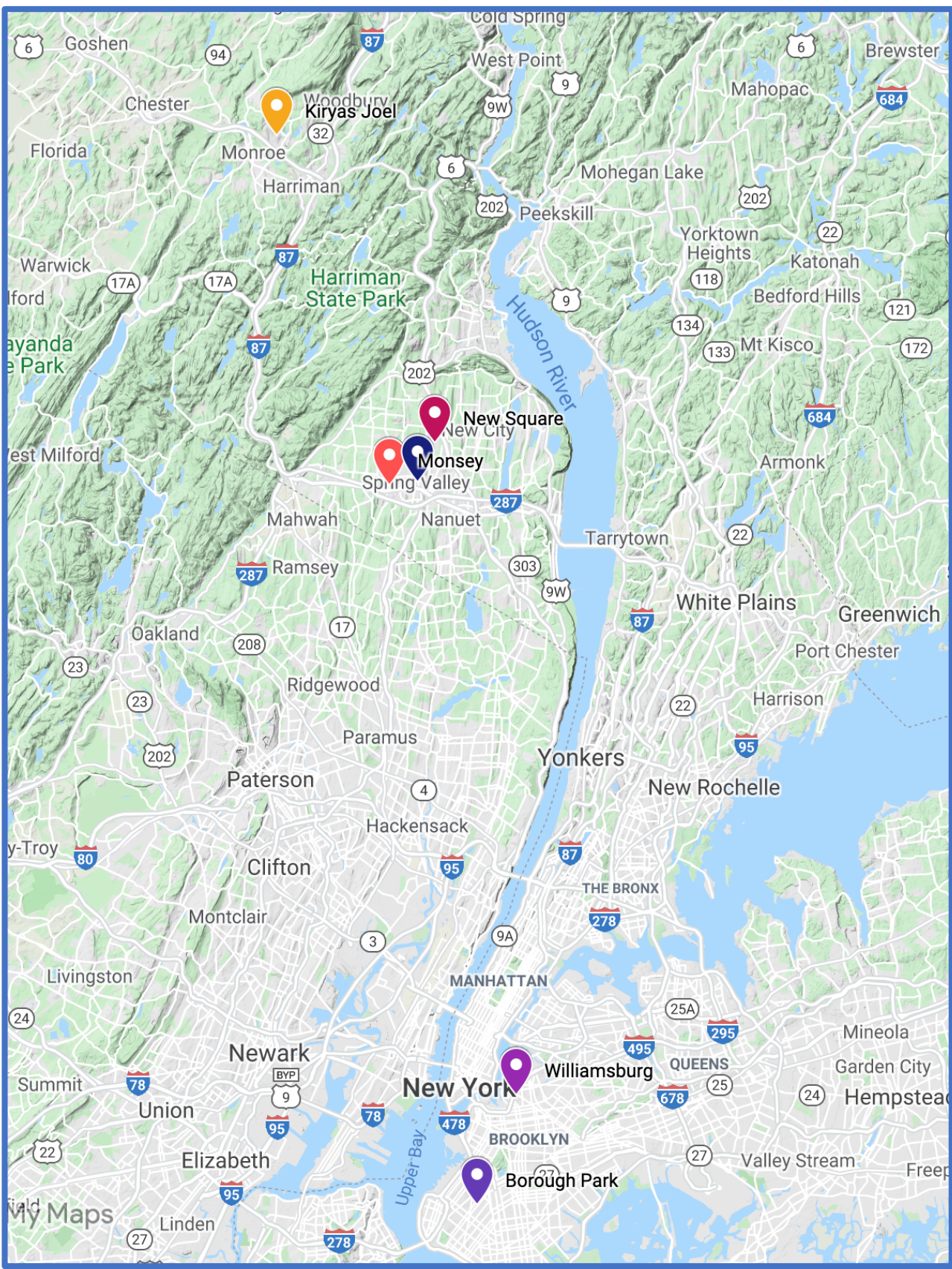
Background

- **Forced migration:**
  - 1st generation HY speakers came to NY as W.W.II refugees
  - Permanent severance of ties with home region

- **Dialect and language mixing:**
  - Post-war displacement → increase in cross-linguistic & cross-dialectal marriages
  - Absorption of non-Yiddish / passive Yiddish speakers into the community

- **Language contact / bilingualism:**
  - Intense language contact and increasing convergence with American English (Assouline, 2018; Krogh, 2016)

- **Gendered language practices**
  - Segregated education with different languages of instruction
  - Differing extents of bilingualism
  - Covert prestige of English among females (see Fader, 2007)

Data & Methods

Participants: 50 native HY speakers, raised in a NY community OR living in one for the past 20 years

Age Range	N	F	Brooklyn	Rockland	Kiryas Joel
54-72	15	8	14 (7 F)	0	0
32-48	18	10	5 (3 M)	4 (1 M)	10 (5 F)
12-29	17	7	1 (M)	9 (8 M)	5 (4 F)
TOTALS	50	25	19	12	15

Methods: Sociolinguistic interviews lasting between 13 - 195 minutes, average duration 79 minutes

Total: 55 hours

Datasets	N tokens	N Loan verbs
OP: 1 & 2 SG object pronouns	1563 (73% 1SG)	47 (3%)
VA: 2 & 3 PL v. agreement	1501 (96% 3PL)	68 (5%)

Linguistic variables
Pronoun person: **1** vs. **2**
Loan: Verb is an English loanword, **Y** vs. **N**
Syntactic construction: (OP dataset only)
  DOC: double object construction
  PREP: prepositional phrase
  Other: lexical dative, dative experiencer, benefactive

Social variables:
Age
Gender: **F** vs. **M**
Neighborhood: **Rockland** vs. **Other**
Parents language: **Same Yiddish / Mixed dialects / Mixed languages** (at least one parent is not Yiddish L1)

Statistical Analysis: Logistic regression with INNOVATION as dependent variable

INNOVATION in **OP**: ACC pronoun (*mikh* or *dikh*) in DAT context
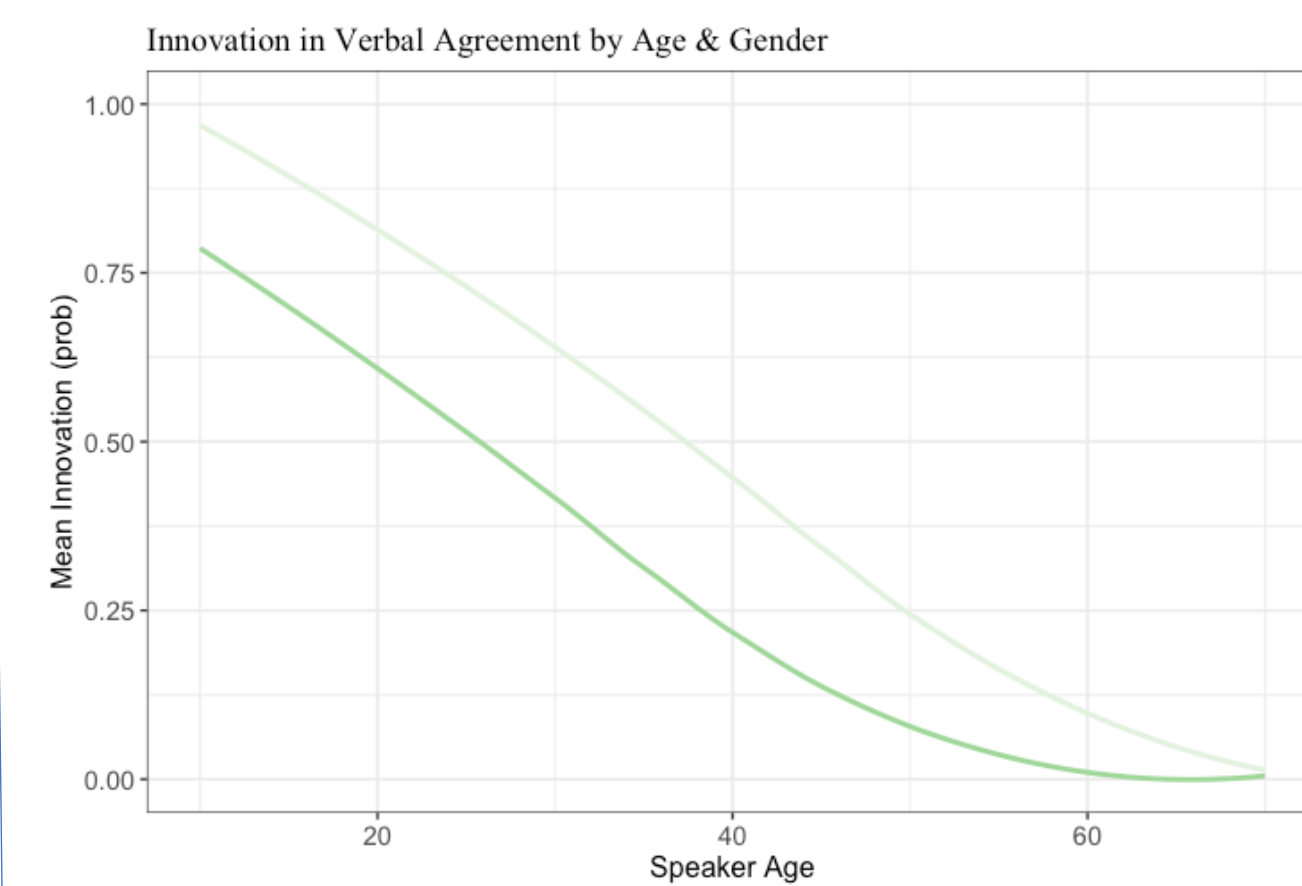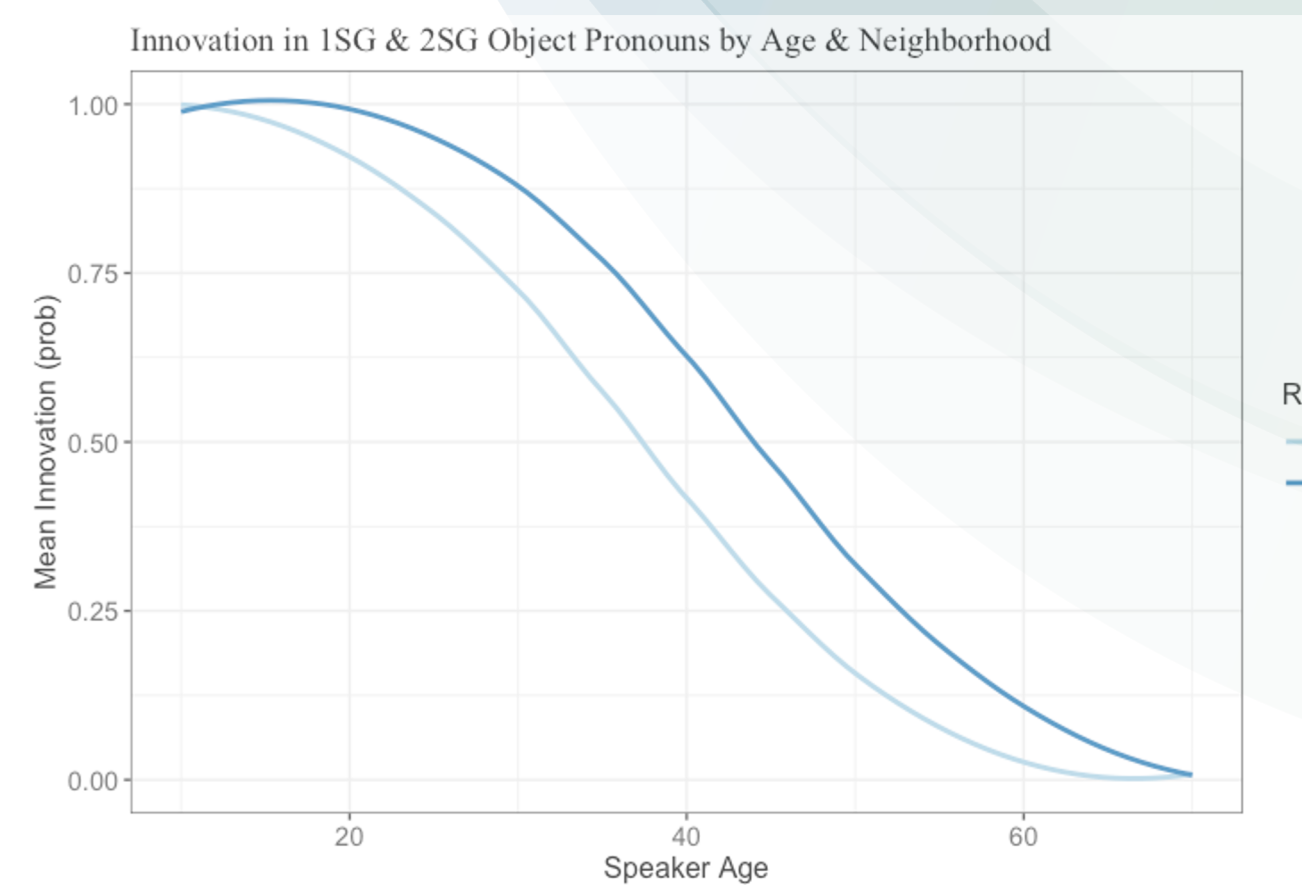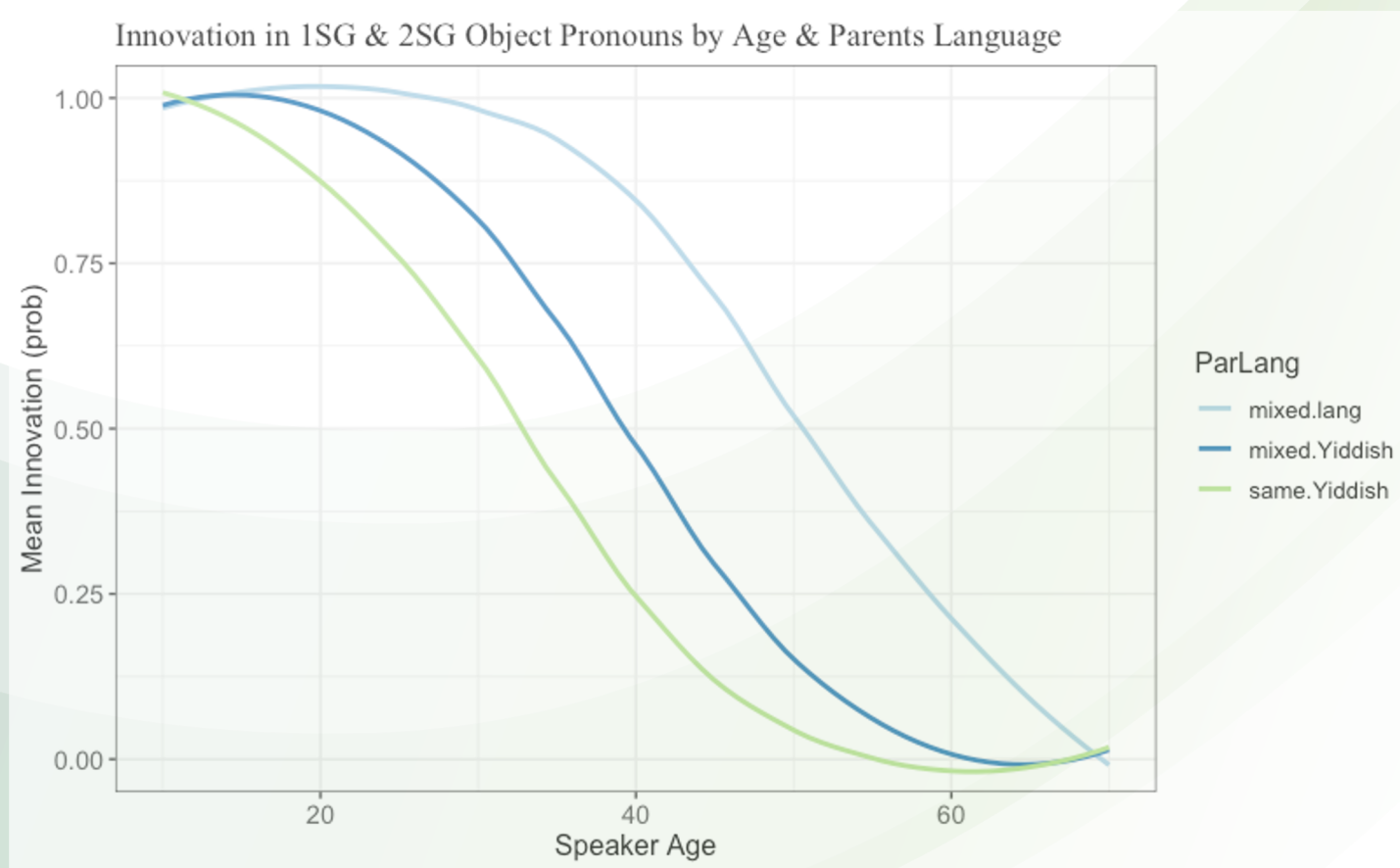INNOVATION in **VA**: agreement morpheme *-(e)n* with 1 or 2 PL pronoun
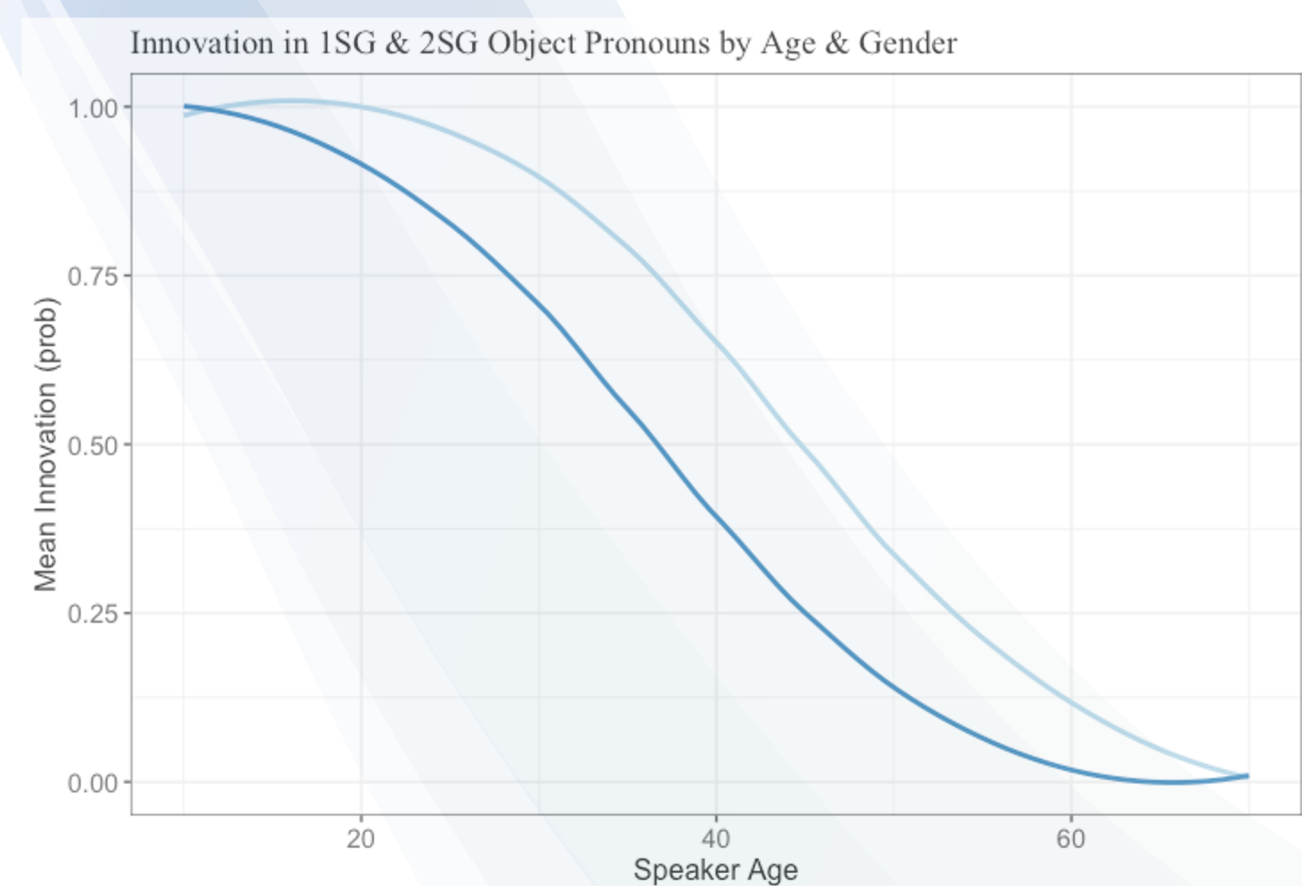
Results

Dataset: OP

Variables	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p-value
(Intercept)	11.16	2.13	5.24	0.000
Age	-0.23	0.04	-6.92	0.000
Gender (M)	-1.85	0.66	-2.83	0.005
Neighborhood (ROCKLAND)	1.52	0.70	0.03	0.029
Parents lang (SAME YID)	-4.01	1.16	-3.45	0.001
Parents lang (MIXED YID)	-2.53	1.19	-2.14	0.033
Syntactic construction (OTHER)	1.06	0.32	3.32	0.001

R Call: Innovation ~ Age + Gender + Neighborhood + Parent Language + Syntactic Construction + Pronoun person + Loan + (1 | Speaker)
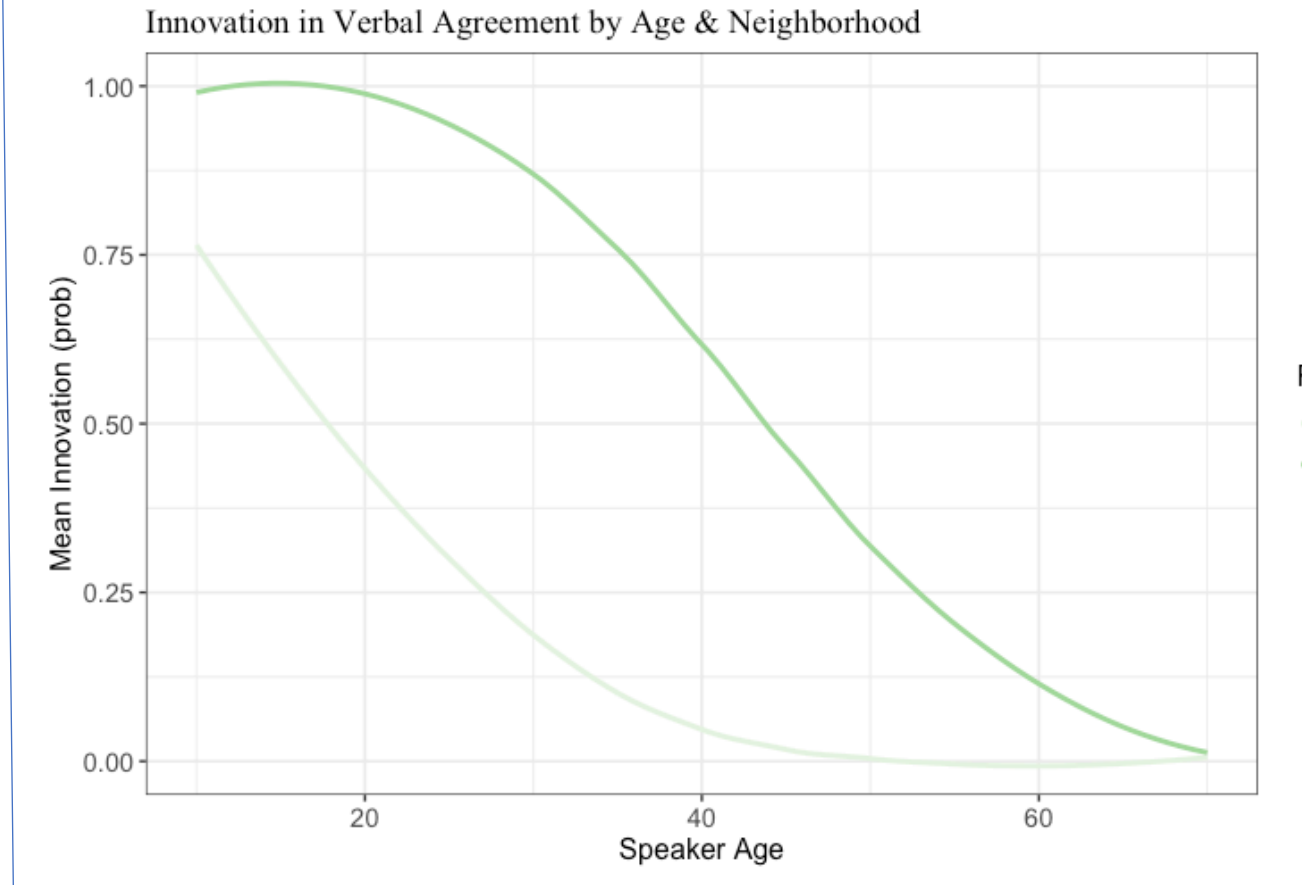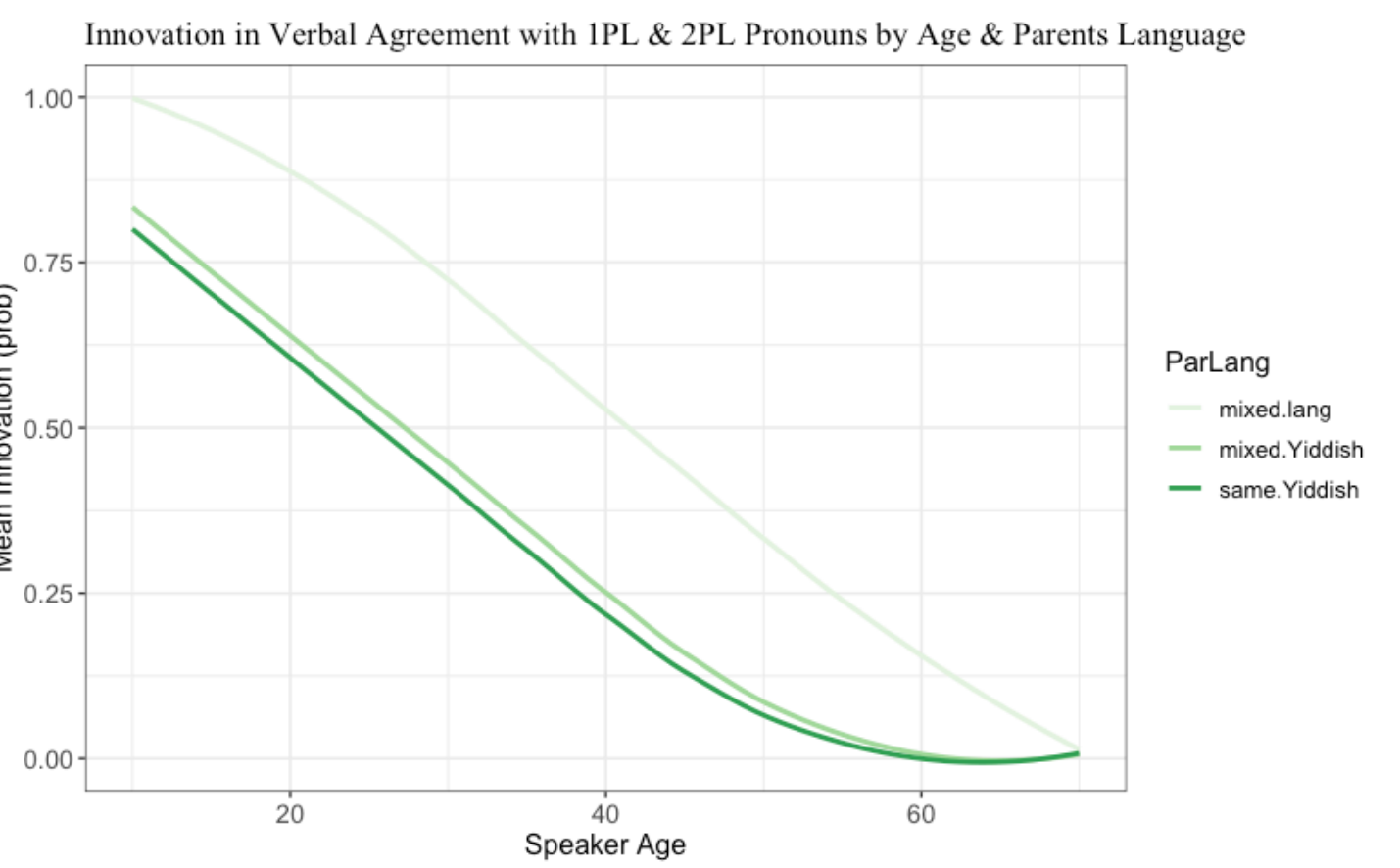
Dataset: VA

Variables	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p-value
(Intercept)	6.15	2.37	2.60	0.010
Age	-0.23	0.05	-4.94	0.000
Gender (M)	-2.56	0.88	-2.91	0.004
Neighborhood (ROCKLAND)	5.66	0.92	0.03	0.000
Parents lang (SAME YID)	-3.54	1.62	-3.45	0.030
Parents lang (MIXED YID)	-3.15	1.69	-2.14	0.062
Pronoun person (2)	3.88	0.72	5.42	0.000

R Call: Innovation ~ Age + Gender + Neighborhood + Parent Language + Pronoun person + Loan + (1 | Speaker)

Innovation in 1SG & 2SG Object Pronouns by Age & Gender

Innovation in 1SG & 2SG Object Pronouns by Age & Parents Language

Innovation in 1SG & 2SG Object Pronouns by Age & Neighborhood

Innovation in Verbal Agreement by Age & Gender

Innovation in Verbal Agreement with 1PL & 2PL Pronouns by Age & Parents Language

Innovation in Verbal Agreement by Age & Neighborhood

Most likely innovator: Young female from Rockland County with at least one parent whose L1 is not Yiddish

Summary and Conclusions

Statistical analyses of both datasets show a significant effect from age with progressively more innovation by younger speakers, indicating change in progress. There is a main effect of gender, which should be interpreted cautiously as gender in this community is confounded by other factors, including language dominance. Speakers with at least one parent whose L1 is not Yiddish seem to be instrumental in both leveling processes. This suggests externally-driven change, with language (and dialect) contact at the level of individual households leading to structural change in the language of the community. That both changes result in more English-like patterns also implicates contact on the level of the individual (bilingual) speaker. Additionally, speakers raised in Rockland County display a greater tendency for innovation than those raised in other New York communities, and this effect is more pronounced in verbal agreement. This may be because Rockland County communities, which were historically more diverse, were likely the sites of more language contact than were the older, more established communities in Brooklyn or the homogeneous community in Orange County.

Contact-induced leveling resulting from migration is well documented (see e.g., Bortoni-Ricardo, 1985; Kerswill, 2006; Trudgill, 1986). Predictions about outcomes rely on the sociohistorical details of migration (e.g., motivation, distance, political hierarchies, community size, isolation from/integration with the origin and host society). As this preliminary analysis shows, the circumstances under which Hasidic Yiddish was transferred to the U.S., and its status as a minority language in New York, make it especially useful for studying the driving forces of change.