

The emergence of grammatical animacy in Israeli Heritage Hasidic Yiddish

Yiddish, the traditional Germanic language of Ashkenazi Jews, is maintained today as a minority language only in some Hasidic communities in the US, Israel and Europe. Yiddish enjoys great prestige in these communities, but the levels of command and use of the language vary between different Hasidic sects: In some sects, Yiddish remains the dominant language also in adulthood, whereas in others, speakers gradually switch to the majority language (Assouline 2017: 30-34). In the communities where the majority language is dominant among adult speakers, Yiddish can be defined as a heritage language (following Polinsky 2018: 9).

The present talk focuses on Hasidic Yiddish heritage speakers in Israel. In order to study the distinct traits of their language, I compare two very similar corpora (recorded in Israel) by the following groups:

1. “Heritage Yiddish speakers”: 1) A recording of a Hasidic “education conference” that took place in 2005 (12 hours, 8 speakers, all male educators in their 40s, 50s and 60s). Speakers come from Hebrew-dominant sects, but the conference was conducted in Yiddish. 2) Recordings of Hebrew-dominant women lecturing in Yiddish to other women about modest behavior (2019, 2 hours, 4 speakers).

2. “Yiddish-dominant speakers” – 1) A recording of a Hasidic “education conference” that took place in 2008 (8 hours, 6 speakers, all male educators in their 40s, 50s and 60s). 2) Recordings of women lecturing in Yiddish to other women about modest behavior (2015, 2 hours, 4 speakers). All Speakers come from Yiddish-dominant extremist isolated groups, ideologically opposed to the use of Israeli Hebrew (Assouline 2017: 6).

A comparison of both corpora reveals several changes in nominal morphology and in subject-verb agreement patterns among heritage speakers (See Table 1). Significantly, these changes are more likely to affect inanimate nouns:

- a. Loss of grammatical gender - common in inanimate nouns. Animate (human) nouns are more resistant to this change and usually maintain their (biological) grammatical gender.
- b. Loss of number agreement (predicate agreement) – common in plural inanimate nouns. Animate nouns are resistant to this change and always trigger plural verbal agreement.

Table 1

Yiddish of Yiddish-dominant speakers (Extremist sects)	Yiddish of Hebrew-dominant speakers “Heritage Yiddish” (ideologically moderate Hasidic sects)
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Nouns usually manifest grammatical gender. Grammatical gender of inanimate nouns may be unstable.	Animate (human) nouns usually manifest grammatical gender Inanimate nouns - grammatical gender is not stable or not marked
Plural nouns always trigger plural verbal agreement	Plural animate (human) nouns always trigger plural verbal agreement Plural inanimate nouns usually do not trigger verbal agreement

First, animate nouns (all referring to humans in the analyzed corpora) usually maintain their masculine grammatical gender among heritage speakers, as in (1):

1. *der* *gut-er* *dokter*
 DEF.M.SG good-M.SG doctor

In contrast, grammatical gender of inanimate nouns in Heritage Yiddish is either unstable, or, more often, not marked at all, with an invariant definite article **de** and an invariant adjectival suffix **-e**. For example (in the nominative case):

2. *de* *sheyne* *tsimer;* *de gute vort;* *de gute zakh*
 DEF beautiful room DEF good word DEF good thing

Second, plural animate nouns maintain plural verbal agreement among heritage speakers, as in (3):

3. *mentshn* *kum-en* *dort*
 people come.PRS-3PL there

In contrast, inanimate plural nouns in heritage Yiddish usually take singular verbs, as in (4):

4. *trern* *gey-t* *fun* *ire* *oygn*
 tears go.PRS-3SG from her eyes
 'tears flow from her eyes'

It seems that animacy is gradually becoming grammaticalized in Israeli Heritage Hasidic Yiddish, since the semantic feature of animacy is evident in the marking of grammatical gender and in the triggering of plural verbal agreement. Moreover, preliminary findings from fieldwork among heritage speakers suggest a possible emergence of a new animacy-based DOM in Israeli Heritage Yiddish (where the animate DO is marked by the preposition **far** ‘for’; distinct from both the documented East-European Yiddish DOM and from the Hebrew DOM), in line with similar developments in heritage Germanic languages (Yager et al. 2015).

Note that animacy is not a grammatical feature of Hebrew morphosyntax, so that this emergent Yiddish grammatical feature does not reflect the direct impact of the speakers’ dominant language, Israeli Hebrew, but rather reflects language-internal dynamics, testifying to the innovative forces of heritage grammars. Significantly, such innovations are more likely to emerge when the heritage language is spoken in close-knit communities (Aalberse, Backus & Muysken 2019: 9-10).

This talk will focus on the sociolinguistic setting of heritage Hasidic Yiddish, suggesting several factors that support “complexification” processes such as the grammaticalization of animacy.

References:

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- Assouline, D. (2017) *Contact and ideology in a multilingual community: Yiddish and Hebrew among the ultra-Orthodox*. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Polinsky, M. (2018) *Heritage languages and their speakers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Yager L., N. Hellmold, H. Joo, et al. (2015) New structural patterns in moribund grammar: Case marking in heritage German. *Frontiers in Psychology* 6, 1716.