“This is the Language that Unites Us”: The Cultural Context of Yiddish in Southern California

Netta Avineri, M.A. Department of Applied Linguistics/TESL, UCLA navineri@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
Yiddish (Jewish in Yiddish) has been spoken by Ashkenazi (European) Jews since 1000 C.E., but in the Holocaust most of its speakers died. There has been a recent resurgence of interest in the language by many of the remaining native Yiddish speakers that have been disappearing. Miriam Korol, UCLA Yiddish lecturer, has stated that Yiddish is a “threatened” language. As one Yiddish-speaking group member noted, “Siz far interest dox Yiddish…siz noch risht noh far lem a shpesh, siz far lem a gorltes culture” (“It’s interesting Yiddish…it’s not only losing a language, it’s losing the whole culture”).

RESEARCH SITE AND YIDDISH-SPEAKING GROUP
California has been central in the recent language revitalization movement. In fact, California has more International Association of Yiddish Clubs (IAYC) members than any other state or region worldwide. Southern California Jewish identities can be fruitfully examined through the lens of Yiddish, for it plays interconnected roles in multiple generations of both Yiddish- and non-Yiddish speakers’ lives.

METHODS & RESEARCH QUESTIONS

METHODS:
This research was collected in a Southern California senior center in 2000-2001 and used ethnographic methods including participant-observation, audio-recordings, and interviews. The researcher met weekly with and interviewed a group of Yiddish-speaking women at the center, in addition to participating in various Southern California Yiddish cultural groups and activities.

DEADLINE: What and when does one use Yiddish?
- What are the functions, especially identity-serving functions, of the use of the language?
- Does the context of the conversation have anything to do with the use of Yiddish?
- When one speaks Yiddish, what does this index (historical relationships, humor, common ancestry)?
- When Yiddish is used in combination with other languages, does this type of usage index a differing relationship to either the content or the language choices?
- How do the members view the use of their language as constructing a “we” and a “they”
- What do the speakers think and believe about their own and the speech

PARTICIPANT CULTURAL & LINGUISTIC BACKGROUNDS

PARTICIPANTS
Name, Age, Bilingualism

Foundation

California

Common Languages Other Languages

Los Angeles, NY

English, Yiddish

Spanish

Miriam 68 Polonek

English, Yiddish

Polish, Spanish

Maya 86 NY

English, Yiddish

Spanish

Frieda 84 Illinois

English, Yiddish

Spanish

Una 86 NY

English, Yiddish

Spanish

Kira 86 Ukraine

English, Yiddish

Ukrainian

Russian, German

Pay 79 Pennsylvania

English, Yiddish

METALINGUISTIC AWARENESS

01 N: Ich hab gezayt Old Sacramento mit a sohn, ilk, old buildings.
I saw (ask) Old Sacramento with many, ilk, old buildings...

02 E: That’s a tough one.

03 M: We’ll have to find out. Farbinal, [ask] we’ll have to find out...

We’ll have to find out. Building, building we’ll have to find out.

04 G: In NY? Do you know how to say buildings in Yiddish?

05 M: Neper, ale kugel.

06 E: House, house.

07 M: That’s it.

08 I think you would call it building.

09 M: Yeah, that’s it.

10 G: I’ve never heard that word before.

LANGUAGE SHIFT: AN EXAMPLE OF LANGUAGE USAGE IN THE DOMAIN OF FAMILY

G: Gertruda: N: Hella, E: P. Frida: M. Myra

01 G: with your family.

02 G: Mein mamme un meyer brudder, ich bin guessing what mein mamme hinten mein mamme hinten mein mamme... My mom and my brother. I was with my family

03 N: (refer): meyer shmorve un meinem... my brother and my

04 (to) G.

05 E: (mother)

06 G: (mother)

07 M: Meir mane.

08 F: (Un think what? What? I pick one. And your dad? Father?

09 G: O, we have a father.

10 N: We have a Santa and a uncle. And my aunt and uncle.

11 G: ( قادر)

12 E: (aunt)

13 M: (aunt)

14 F: (aunt)

15 E: (uncle)

16 G: (uncle)

17 F: Uncle is a-how do you say under?

18 M: (aunt)

18 M: (mother)

EXAMPLES OF CODE SWITCHING AND CODE MIXING

Example 1:

01 K: My name is Klara. I came to California.

My name is Klara. I come to America eleven years ago.

02 F: Klara, it’s a new one!

Example 2:

01 G: [aunt] got a good.

It was (ask) food

Example 3:

01 M: [aunt] got a good.

It was (ask) food

Example 4:

01 F: [aunt] good morning.

I promised Hella.

LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES

Anonymous:

“We won’t give you the pure Yiddish here.”

Myra:

A language is dead to you if you don’t speak it.

Gertruda: Yiddish is connected to who I am talking to, that’s it. Of course I feel Jewish, though I’m not religious.

Frida:

I don’t consider Yiddish as part of my lifestyle, but I grew up that way and I am proud to say that I’m Jewish. And, yet, what surprises me, my siblings, they grew up in the same house as me, one brother is older than I and the other three are younger, and they don’t know as much Yiddish as I do… but maybe it’s because I use it here, a little more.”

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The present analysis highlights the role of metalinguistic awareness, language shift, code switching and mixing, and language ideologies among a group of Yiddish-speaking women in their late 60s – late 80s. Within this setting, Yiddish expressed content and indexed specific relationships with Jewish/ethnic identity, family background, and childhood experiences. In addition, the specific context of the Yiddish-speaking group itself provided an environment in which the women socialized the researcher into an appreciation of and respect for the language, its history, and its speakers.

As Fishman states, a Jewish language is any language “that has some demonstrable function in the role-repertory of a Jewish sociocultural network” (1981:5-6). Over time, the function of Yiddish within Jewish communities has shifted. Presently, Yiddish serves as a central index of a common cultural experience. In all of its forms (lexical items, speech style, all levels of language usage, music, and poetry), Yiddish serves to unite the Southern California Jewish population such that they experience community within the complex multicultural context of California.

Since collecting this focal research, the researcher has continued to be involved in the California Yiddish cultural community. She has developed an intergenerational Yiddish language partnership program, matching UCLA students in Yiddish courses with Yiddish speakers in the Southern California community. In addition, she is working closely with Yiddish-Net Los Angeles to develop a fellowship program aimed at fostering Yiddish cultural literacy among young people.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & WORKS CITED

Professor Paul Kroskrity, Professor Kannan Bouchkin

Miriam Korol, Henry and Rachel Sukki

Israel Levine Senior Center Yiddish-speaking group

Workroom’s Circle Yiddish choir

Lila Majmer

UCLA Center for Jewish Studies

My family
