

Sarah Bunin Benor
Stanford University

Yeshivish, the language of Talmud study:
Newly Orthodox Jewish men's use of Yiddish-influenced English

The multi-volume text of the ancient Babylonian Talmud, the central rabbinic text of Judaism, is written in Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic. But throughout history Jews have discussed it in some variety of their everyday language. In the contemporary American Orthodox community, an English-based language of text study has evolved (see references). This variety is often called Yeshivish, after the institution where most Orthodox men spend years studying the Talmud and other Jewish texts. In this paper I present an analysis of the Yeshivish speech of seven Orthodox men. I show how the quantity and quality of Hebrew and Yiddish influences correlate with the speaker's religious background.

Variables are analyzed at several levels of language:

- 1) loan word phonology:
 - a. Hebrew/Aramaic /o/ => Yiddish [oy] ~ Modern Hebrew [o]
 - b. Hebrew/Aramaic /th/ (theta) => Yiddish [s] ~ Modern Hebrew [t]
 - c. Hebrew/Aramaic /ə/ (schwa): /#CəC/ => Yiddish [CC] ~ orthography-influenced [CəC]
- 2) loan word morphology: Hebrew/Yiddish ~ English plurals
- 3) intonation:
 - a. text translation in similar ~ different contours
 - b. quasi-chanting intonation contours
- 4) syntax/semantics: Yiddish-influenced phrasal verbs (e.g., "bring down," "tell over")
- 5) lexicon: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish loan words

In previous research, these variables have been found to be distinctive features of Orthodox Jewish English (the first variant in 1 through 3a and the feature's presence over word count in 3b through 5).

The seven speakers were recorded at least once in their weekly Talmud learning sessions. This activity is conducive to comparative analysis, as the speakers are studying various volumes of the Talmud in pairs or small groups. The main social variable is how long the speaker has been Orthodox. Participants include 2 FFBs (those who are from 'Orthodox' from birth) and 5 BTs ("ba'alei teshuva," Jews who have chosen to become Orthodox) who have been Orthodox for 2, 5, 7, 10, and 30 years. All of the participants are native speakers of American English and have spent time studying in a Yeshiva in Israel or New York.

There are striking differences among the participants at all levels of language. With a few exceptions, the use of Orthodox features correlates with the time the speaker has been Orthodox, suggesting language change over the individual's lifespan. One of the FFBs is categorical in his use of the Orthodox variants in 1b and 2. Otherwise, all speakers exhibit variation, with the 2-year BT having the fewest Orthodox features.

Statistical significance was not calculated because of the small sample size and the presence of several “knockouts.” According to informal observations, non-Orthodox speakers are categorical in their non-use of the Orthodox variants in 1a, 1b, 3b, and 4.

Results are explained with respect to participants’ access to speech styles and desires to integrate into Orthodox communities. Ideologies about religiosity, holiness, and Biblical lineage play a large role, especially in the use of phonological variants. This paper places the study of Yeshivish in the context of sociolinguistic variation, showing how individuals can change their language in a situation of “conversion,” based on increased access and changed ideologies.

References:

- Benor, Sarah Bunin. 2001. “Sounding Learned: The Gendered Use of /t/ in Orthodox Jewish English.” *Penn Working Papers in Linguistics: Selected papers from NWA 2000*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.
- Gold, David. 1985. “Jewish English.” In Joshua Fishman, ed. *Readings in the Sociology of Jewish Languages*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- Heilman, Samuel. 1983. *People of the Book*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Steinmetz, Sol. 1987. *Yiddish and English: A Century of Yiddish in America*. University: University of Alabama Press.
- Weinreich, Max. 1980. *History of the Yiddish Language*. Translated by S. Noble and J. Fishman from *Geshikhte fun der Yidisher Shprakh* (1973). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Weiser, Chaim M. 1995. *FrumSpeak: A Dictionary of Yeshivish*. Northvale: Jason Aronson.