The Erasure of Hasidic Yiddish from Twentieth Century Yiddish Linguistics

Chaya R. Nove
The Graduate Center, City University of New York, New York, NY, USA

Abstract

Unlike other Yiddish dialects that were diminished to the point of virtual obsolescence in the decades following World War II, Hasidic Yiddish remains the dominant language for several hundred thousand Hasidic Jews across the globe. And yet, a survey of the research on Yiddish linguistics published during the second half of the 20th century does not reflect this reality. In this article, I review how the ideological underpinnings of Yiddish linguistics created and perpetuated a disciplinary preoccupation with a hypothetical standard at the expense of theoretically informative empirical studies of an evolving Yiddish dialect. Specifically, I show how linguistic chauvinism, a series of calamitous events, and historical anti-religiosity complicated by new resentments, led to the erasure of Hasidic dialects from Yiddish scholarship. Finally, I highlight significant contributions that recent empirical studies of Hasidic Yiddish are making to the field of linguistics.

Keywords

Yiddish – Hasidic Yiddish – language ideology – Yiddish linguistics – Yiddishism

* An earlier version of this article was presented at the Association for Jewish Studies in Washington D.C., December 17–19, 2017. In preparing this article, I benefited greatly from the guidance and expertise of Juliette Blevins (Graduate Center, CUNY), who contributed content and helped develop and hone the arguments presented here; and Bill Haddican (Queens College), who offered feedback and encouragement throughout the process. Dalit Assouline (University of Haifa) generously extended the opportunity to submit this article, along with advice and support. Sarah Benor (Hebrew Union College) reviewed the manuscript and offered insightful suggestions for improving it. Zelda Kahan-Newman provided additional perspectives and input. Isaac Bleaman (New York University) contributed ideas and references. Michael Newman (Queens College) helped conceptualize the project at an early stage. Paul Glasser reviewed the final draft and graciously commented on points where our perspectives
Introduction

Yiddish linguistics refers to the scientific investigation of the organization of sounds, words, and meanings in the language system, as well as in the context of its cultural and social functions. Modern Yiddish linguistics has its roots in Yiddishism, an ideology that arose out of the *Haskalah* ‘Jewish enlightenment’ in response to the Jewish crisis of modernity in the late 19th century. But one hundred years after the 1908 Czernowitz conference, where Yiddish was declared an official language of Diaspora Jews, the linguistic landscape had changed in almost every conceivable way. Eastern Europe, once the heartland of Yiddish-speaking Jewry, was now nearly devoid of it. The number of Yiddish speakers worldwide was roughly a tenth of what it had been at the dawn of the 20th century, an estimated 500,000–1 million from approximately 8–10 million.\(^1\) The diversity of dialects, which had been carefully analyzed by scholars and documented in tomes resting on university library shelves (e.g., Herzog, Sunshine, Kiefer, & Putschke 2012), was vastly diminished in the streets where Yiddish was spoken. By the second half of the 20th century, Yiddish as a culturally transmitted language of everyday life existed almost exclusively in Hasidic communities worldwide, especially in New York, Jerusalem, and Antwerp. In these areas, distinctive dialects, derived from the Central Yiddish (CY)\(^2\) varieties of Eastern Europe and influenced by the co-territorial majority languages, were emerging. And yet, a scholar surveying the research on Yiddish linguistics published during this time would emerge with a very different view. For although the changing demographics were noted early on by some Yiddish diverged. To all these mentors and colleagues, as well as to an anonymous reviewer, I owe a debt of gratitude. I take full responsibility for the proposals, as well as for any factual or interpretational errors, contained herein.

\(^1\) Estimates of current Yiddish speakers are from Assouline (forthcoming). Earlier estimates are derived from census data on language reported in Fishman (1991b) (Russian Empire 1897, United States 1910, and Ottoman Palestine 1916) and supplemented by statistics about the Jewish population in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1900, as reported in the *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*: http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/.

\(^2\) Eastern Yiddish is discussed in terms of three main dialects: Northeastern Yiddish originated in modern-day Lithuania, Belarus, Latvia, areas of northeastern Poland, northern and eastern Ukraine, and western Russia; Central Yiddish in Poland, eastern Slovakia, eastern Hungary and Transylvania; and Southeastern Yiddish in Moldova and parts of Ukraine. Contemporary Hasidic Yiddish derives from the dialects spoken in what is presently southwestern Ukraine (Zakarpattia Oblast), southeastern Slovakia, and northeastern Hungary. While these dialects are likely derived from Central Yiddish, they have been significantly less studied than other Eastern Yiddish dialects (Weinreich 1964, Krogh 2013). Studies that have focused on this region have found evidence of considerable variation and dialect mixing, a consequence of its geographical, political, cultural and linguistic circumstances (Weinreich 1964).
academics (e.g., Weinreich 1964, Fishman 1981), there was a conspicuous
dearth of research on spoken Hasidic Yiddish\(^3\) throughout this period.

Irvine and Gal (2000:38) define erasure as “the process in which ideology [...]
renders some persons or activities (or sociolinguistic phenomena) invisible.” In
this article, I review how the ideological underpinnings of Yiddish linguistics
shaped and constrained the scholarly output of the field for nearly a hundred
years. Specifically, I show how linguistic chauvinism, a series of calamitous
events, and historical anti-religiosity complicated by new resentments, led to
the erasure of Hasidic dialects from Yiddish scholarship. In the second section,
I describe how the normative agenda of Yiddishists arose in response to the
popular marginalization of Yiddish. The third section reviews the sequence of
historical events that led to the idealization of European Yiddish dialects. Next,
I juxtapose the demographics of Yiddish speakers in the United States in the
second half of the 20th century with surveys of research on Yiddish published
during that period, to demonstrate scholars’ neglect of spoken Hasidic Yiddish.
The following section discusses possible factors for such disregard, including
anti-Hasidic bias. In the final section, I show how new research agendas focusing
on Hasidic Yiddish are enlarging the scope of the field in the new millen-
nium, reflecting what some scholars have characterized as a post-ideological
era in Yiddish Studies (Glaser 2008; Krutikov 2002; Kuznitz 2014). This reorien-
tation coincides with an emergent attention to minority language documenta-
tion and description in the field of linguistics, and is contributing greatly to our
knowledge about Yiddish, and to our understanding of multilingualism and
language change more generally.

**Linguistic Chauvinism and the Normative Agenda**

When Yiddishists undertook the transformation of Yiddish into the center-
piece of a national Jewish identity, their initial stance was defensive. Centuries
of denigration, first by medieval Christian scholars and later by proponents
of the Jewish Enlightenment (maskilim), had saddled Yiddish with a reputa-
tion as a corrupt offshoot of German, unworthy of serious regard (Frakes 2012;

\(^3\) I use the term Hasidic Yiddish to refer to the group of dialects spoken by a majority of Hasidic
Jews globally, except in Lubavitch (also known as Chabad) communities. Lubavitch is a
Hasidic movement that originated in modern day Belarus. Lubavitch Yiddish is based on
Northeastern Yiddish and is being variably maintained in these communities. I acknowledge
that the exclusion of Lubavitch Yiddish renders the term problematic, but I resort to it for
expository purposes. It remains for linguists working on Hasidic Yiddish to develop inclusive
terminology reflecting the reality of spoken Yiddish.
For medieval scholars, Yiddish served as a symbolic resource of xenophobic and anti-Semitic discourse. Constant exposure to opprobrium of their vernacular led to what Gilman (1986) describes as linguistic self-hatred, the internalization by Yiddish speakers of the distorted image of their language presented by their social reference group. This inferiority complex came to the fore in the late 18th century, when Jewish *maskilim*, vying for recognition from the non-Jewish majority, echoed and amplified the rhetoric of the Christians. *Maskilim* largely viewed Yiddish as a vestige of an antiquated lifestyle, insisting that the cultural rehabilitation of the "primitive" Jewish masses could transpire only through the eradication of this so-called *zhargon* (Goldsmith 1976; Kuznitz 2014; Trachtenberg 2008). The Yiddishist mission to elevate the language was thus a radical one. In asserting the cultural autonomy of Diaspora Jews, they were merely riding the revolutionary *Zeitgeist* that had been sweeping through Europe for at least a century, and which had given rise to a number of (secular) Jewish nationalist movements, such as Zionism and Bundism.4 But the choice of Yiddish as the instrument of their nascent movement, intended as a corrective to those who would erase or replace it, provoked ridicule from political opponents and skepticism from adherents (Goldsmith 1976; Trachtenberg 2008). It soon became apparent that the credibility of Yiddishism would rest on the extent to which the language could demonstrably function as an expression of modernity and high culture. At the turn of the 20th century, significant progress had been made in this regard. Through the literary works of classic Yiddish authors, disseminated to a wide audience via Yiddish newspapers, an orthographic and literary standard was emerging, and the prestige of Yiddish was on the rise.

The Czernowitz conference of 1908 was a defining moment for Yiddishism, shaping the discourse about Yiddish for decades to come (Trachtenberg 2008). But it did not diminish the quandary faced by the architects of the movement, namely, how to reconcile their supposed allegiance to the *folksmasn* ‘folk masses’ and the variety of Yiddish dialects they represented, with the desire to garner respect from the European social elite. The latter goal, activists determined, necessitated the creation of a standard dialect with institutional backing (Kuznitz 2014). The Standard Yiddish (StY) they established was based

4 Zionism promoted the creation of a Jewish homeland and pushed for the revival of Hebrew as a spoken vernacular to replace Yiddish. Divergent language agendas (Hebrew vs. Yiddish) led to a protracted conflict between Zionists and Yiddishists. Bundism was a socialist movement that vehemently opposed the separatist foundations of Zionism. And while Bundists did not necessarily share the Yiddishist agenda to place language at the forefront of a Jewish cultural identity, they saw the value of Yiddish as an instrument to galvanize the Jewish proletariat and promoted it as a national language for Jews.
on Northeastern Yiddish (ney). While not native to the majority of Eastern European Yiddish speakers, ney was nonetheless regarded as the most prestigious dialect because of its association with intellectualism (Katz 1998). Thus, like ney, StY does not distinguish between long and short vowels (e.g., long /i/ in zin ‘sons’ vs. short /i/ in zin ‘sense’), a nuance that was maintained in the southern Yiddish dialects; nor does it share with the latter the merger of ney /u/ and /i/ (e.g., zun ‘son,’ and zin ‘sons’). However, the standardizers also introduced an artificial merger (i.e., one that was not previously attested in this dialect) of ney /ej/ and /oj/, so that [brejt] ‘bread’ and [hojz] ‘house’ both have the vowel /oj/ (Birnbaum 1979). In the StY orthography, such distinctions are rendered invisible.

Devotees who had waxed poetic about Yiddish as the soul of Ashkenazic Jewry and the vessel of the Diaspora experience now redirected their nationalist zeal toward corpus planning. Chronological lines were drawn to prohibit new German loanwords (the so-called *daytshmerizmen* ‘Germanisms’) from entering the lexicon (see, e.g., Borokhov 1913; Prilutski 1911; Weinreich 1938). The *Ausbau* principle, which originated, somewhat ironically, in Germany, was eventually brought into service to justify this purist approach. The concept of *Ausbau*, literally to ‘build out,’ was introduced to linguistics by Heinz Kloss, to refer to the deliberate expansion and reshaping of a language so as to render it distinct and independent from another closely related language.5 19th and 20th century Yiddishists adopted the slogan *avek fun daytsh!* ‘away from German!’ to distance it from its German ancestor (J. A. Fishman 2006:97; see, e.g., Schaechter 1977; 1980). But the greater paradox was the utilization of exclusionary methods to combat stigmatization. Hutton (1993:48) remarks, “Yiddish linguists accepted broadly the rhetoric that speaks of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ language; they merely rejected the application of negative characteristics to Yiddish, or at least to the ideal form of Yiddish it was their ambition to create.” In their quest to de-marginize the language, Yiddish intellectuals became increasingly disengaged from the vernacular of the masses. Thus, the program to oppose anti-Yiddish chauvinism morphed into a normative agenda, and Yiddish activists became elite guardians of a standard that obscured the rich dialectal diversity that had evolved over the course of a millennium (Hutton 1993; Katz 1993).

5 The motives for *Ausbau* are usually sociopolitical, as for example, after the breakup of Yugoslavia, language planners in Croatia added Latin and western European borrowings to the language, while Serbians expanded their lexicon via Slavic loans (J. A. Fishman 2006). The opposite of *Ausbau*, according to Fishman (2008), is *Einbau*, which is building a language so as to maximize its similarity to another.
Yiddishism achieved institutional support with the establishment of The Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut (Yiddish Scientific Institute, known as YIVO) in Vilna (Vilnius) in 1925. With Max Weinreich at its helm, the organization oversaw the collection, examination and archiving of thousands of artifacts and massive amounts of folklore from Yiddish-speaking communities throughout Eastern Europe. While its official stance vis-à-vis Jewish politics was neutral and it professed no explicit malice towards religious Jews, scholars have remarked on YIVO’s view of Orthodoxy “as doomed by the inevitable march of progress and thus ultimately irrelevant to modern Jewish society” (Kuznitz 2014:108). Although Orthodox institutions and communities were included in its zamlen ‘collecting’ activities, they were treated by YIVO representatives as the last vestiges of a rapidly vanishing, and thus insignificant, community (Kuznitz 2014). This secular bias also surfaced in the form of subtle systemic aggression against potential religiously observant participants, e.g., the scheduling of teachers’ meetings on Shabbat and major Jewish holidays (Kuznitz 2014). Communication from Solomon Birnbaum, a linguist and Orthodox Jew, to Max Weinreich demonstrates that these prejudices did not go unnoticed, at least by YIVO outsiders. Responding to an invitation to collaborate with YIVO, Birnbaum justified his reticence in terms of a lack of scientific neutrality: “It seems to me that all the activists in the matter start from the principle of a secular Yiddish culture, and for me it is not possible to assist in such work. […] In short, I do not see any possibility of neutral work” (Birnbaum 1925, quoted in Kuznitz 2014:108). The grassroots nature of YIVO, which had ordinary citizens in charge of its data collection, gradually waned. The institute was criticized for its authoritarian position towards language planning and its failure to participate in social and political activities (Hutton 1993). Following its 1945 relocation to New York, YIVO was accused of neglecting the popular readership in its publications (Kuznitz 2014), ultimately gaining a reputation as an ivory tower for Yiddish studies. As Yiddish speakers in the U.S. gradually shifted to English, its efforts became ever more focused on language planning and maintenance. YIVO’s affiliation with institutions of higher education in the U.S. led to a hegemony of StY. Its transliteration conventions, which do not reflect the

Viewed through a framework of cultural marginalization, e.g., as described by theorist Gayatri Spivak, the very attempt by YIVO to include Birnbaum can be interpreted as an example of “the putative center welcome[ing] selective inhabitants of the margins in order better to exclude the margin” (Spivak 2012:145). A number of critical race theorists have highlighted such patterns of exceptionalism, in which select members of racialized groups are held up as exemplars, and simultaneously as proof of the post-racial attitude of the majority group (see, e.g., Alim & Smitherman 2012; Wise 2009).
phonological nuances of the spoken dialects, were almost universally adopted by English-language publications that include scholarship about Yiddish.

Katz (1997:38) asserts, “There can be no doubt that the course of [Yiddish] research was strongly influenced by the position of the researchers themselves (all of whom were raised in non-Haredi [ultra-Orthodox] settings).” (translation mine). Indeed, the ideologies of Yiddishism inherited by YIVO-affiliated scholars, along with its prescriptivist emphasis, seeped into academia, where it remained for much of the 20th century.

**World War II Era Calamities and the Search for Authenticity**

About a decade after the founding of YIVO, World War II aborted all research activities and upended the entire Yiddish panorama. An estimated five million Yiddish speakers were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators. Those who survived the genocide became refugees in foreign lands, forced to acclimate to the culture and language of their new homelands. In the Soviet Union, where it had enjoyed a period of renaissance and governmental support, Yiddish language and culture was ultimately stifled under the Stalinist regime. Not only was Russian made compulsory for all, but Yiddish theatres were barred, Yiddish books destroyed, and Yiddish writers executed. Finally, with the revival of Modern Hebrew, and especially when the newly established State of Israel tied its fate to it, Yiddish was suppressed on Israeli territory. The Zionist identity was seen as incompatible with a language tainted by Diaspora victimhood (Goldsmith 1976; Seidman 1997).

By the mid-1960s, when Jewish refugees who had found their bearings were raising families and looking towards the future, it became clear that the use of Yiddish was in decline. In the U.S., where Yiddish language and culture had flourished since the late 19th century, the number of speakers was diminishing rapidly due to linguistic assimilation and researchers began predicting its demise (J. A. Fishman 1981). Scholars and benefactors seeking to revitalize it found a foster home for Yiddish in some of America’s best colleges, including Columbia University. In this makeshift Yiddish svive ‘environment,’ the language continued to be taught and studied. While some have described the Yiddish of academia as “denatured” because it purportedly lacked ideological purpose (Prager 1974), others have remarked on the artificiality of a language removed from lived Jewish experience: “The university Yiddish is very often a dry, cold, minimalistic, lowest common denominator language developed by linguists far from Jewish life, lacking in the color, spontaneity and beauty of the Yiddish it claims to be derived from” (Katz 2016).
Because of the trauma of the recent past and uncertainty about the future, the field of Yiddish linguistics was, for much of the 20th century, permeated with an anxiety that caused it to turn inwards. Leading Yiddish linguists associated with the early movement found refuge in past programs of prescriptivism and stylistics. Major developments in the decades immediately following the war included the publication of dictionaries and instructional materials for teaching Yiddish at the tertiary level (e.g., Mark & Joffe 1966; Schaechter 1986ab, Weinreich 1949, 1977). In addition, the sudden and violent loss of the European Yiddish heartland contributed to the portrayal of expatriate Jews as the sole “authentic” speakers of the language. This idealization of European Yiddish, fueled by the nostalgia of Holocaust survivors, led many researchers to focus exclusively on documenting the dialects of older immigrants (e.g., Herzog 1965; Herzog et al. 2012). In the words of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2013:xii), “language [in Yiddish studies] becomes a proxy for its absent speakers.” Elegiac discourses foregrounded the precariousness of Yiddish and diverted attention away from spaces where it was being maintained. After a while, scholars agreed that Yiddish had entered a “postvernacular” stage and began to speculate about its “afterlife” meanings and uses (Glaser 2008; Rabinovitch, Goren, & Pressman 2013; Sadan 2011; Shandler 2004, 2006b, 2006a).

Demographic Shifts and the Erasure of Hasidic Yiddish

Soldat-Jaffe (2012) observes that a discursive emphasis on calamity can obscure the vital and enduring elements of the Yiddish narrative. Indeed, while the story of Yiddish decline is accurate and significant, it is not the only one worth telling. For example, while U.S. census data show a 50% decrease in the number of Yiddish speakers nationwide between 1980 and 2015 (the period during which consistency of questions allow for comparison), during this time the concentration of Yiddish speakers increased from 49% to 85% in New York, the state that is home to the major Hasidic communities in the U.S. Starting in 2005, there has been a steady annual increase in Yiddish spoken in the home nationwide, reflecting an upsurge in the number of Yiddish speakers in New York alone (Manson et al. 2017). These statistics depict what some scholars were observing, but few were elaborating on at the time (see, however, J. A. Fishman 1991), namely, that Yiddish was being successfully transmitted and maintained as a native vernacular by Hasidim.  

7 A similar trend has been reported for Yiddish in Canada (see Davids 2010–2011).
Considering the patterns of continuity described above, it is reasonable to presume that Hasidic dialects would become a prime focus of research for linguists and students studying Yiddish in the second half of the 20th century, especially those in proximity to the New York communities in which they are spoken. And yet, I am aware of only one published study (Jochnowitz 1968), that analyzes spoken Hasidic Yiddish (HY) between the years 1950 and 1990, the period that saw the establishment and dramatic growth of these vibrant Yiddish speaking communities in New York (and in Jerusalem, London, Montreal, and Antwerp). Furthermore, starting with the appointment of Uriel Weinreich as the Atran Professor of Yiddish Language, Literature, and Culture in 1952, the linguistics department at Columbia University became one of the foremost graduate-level degree-awarding Yiddish programs in the United States. Weinreich’s student, Marvin (Mikhl) Herzog, later joined him as a professor of Yiddish, and as the director of *The Language and Culture Atlas of Ashkenazic Jewry* (LCAAJ), a joint project of Columbia and YIVO. Herzog went on to advise a number of graduate students working on Yiddish. Nevertheless, a survey of the 19 graduate-level theses on Yiddish linguistics completed at New York universities from 1934 to the present, reveals that the first (and only) one focusing on HY, by linguistic anthropologist Ayala Fader of New York University, appears only in 2000. A broader search that comprises the 47 Yiddish-focused doctoral theses completed in the U.S. during the same time period still yields Fader (2000) as the first study of HY, and also includes Vaisman (2009).

Focusing on Yiddish publications, it is perhaps not unanticipated that scholars writing for the early issues of *Yidishe Shprakh* in the 1940s, did not yet take note of spoken HY. However, third generation HY speakers were already coming of age when the journal’s penultimate issue was released in 1986. Yet, I could not find anything on HY in *Yidishe Shprakh* from 1950 to 1986. Furthermore, in 2013, the journal published an issue that was thirteen years in the making. In this 209–page number, there is a short essay by Harold Frishman (2013) entitled “*Ir zolt mir nor zayn gezunt un shtark!* (Bagris formulen in der khsidisher velt)” [“May you Live and Be Well!” (Greetings among the Hasidim)], which presents an inventory of Yiddish greetings. The author does not disclose the source of the data and Hasidim are never explicitly mentioned, but references to a rebbe and religious life seem to imply that they are the ones

---

8 To locate these, I searched the ProQuest, WorldCat, and OpenThesis Dissertation and Theses databases for theses containing the word “Yiddish,” and then narrowed the results to those related to linguistics either via a filtering option or through manual review. I make no claims about the exhaustiveness of this survey.

9 The time period during which the journal *YIVO Bleter* was published, 1932 to 1962, may be too early to reflect the vitality of HY in the U.S.
utilizing such expressions. There are no analytic studies of spoken HY in this issue, either.

To examine patterns in peer-reviewed publications published in English, I looked at research articles published in the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* (IJSL). Four considerations motivated and justified the choice of this journal. First, the journal's lifespan (1974–present) is relatively extensive and coincides with a good portion of the period of change in demographics and language use described in this article. Second, IJSL has published comparatively more articles about Yiddish than many other major linguistics journals. Third, the journal’s founder and editor, Joshua Fishman, was a prominent Yiddish scholar, an influential figure in sociolinguistics, and a strong proponent of research on spoken Yiddish, an orientation that continued under subsequent editors. Finally, in 1999, IJSL published a thematic issue on HY, edited by Miriam Isaacs and Lewis Glinert. Unlike some other linguistic journals that have no representation of this topic, this journal would, if anything, be biased towards representing HY. My search of the IJSL index yielded 37 articles about Yiddish published between 1974 and 2016. As predicted given the journal’s history, many are empirical studies of spoken Yiddish dialects (or Jewish languages more generally), some based on fieldwork. And yet there is only one article that focuses on the Yiddish of Hasidim prior to the 1999 special issue: Poll (1980) analyzes the ideological problems that the use of Israeli Hebrew presents to Yiddish-speaking anti-Zionist groups in Israel. It is also quite surprising, given the history of Yiddish research in the U.S. and in New York, especially, that none of the articles in the 1999 thematic issue report on HY spoken there.

Finally, while there is no shortage of ethnographies about Hasidic life and culture (e.g., Belcove-Shalin 2012; Kranzler 1995a; Morris 2012; Rubin 1972, 1997); and scholars have written in-depth about the oral traditions (Mintz 1968), language socialization practices (Fader 2009; Schulman 2016b; Vaisman 2012), and language ideology (Mitchell 2006; Soldat-Jaffe 2006) of Hasidic communities, the first monograph centered on spoken HY was only published last year (Assouline 2017). While some of the publications cited here mention HY and offer some linguistic analysis, they do not focus primarily on it. In Jacobs (2005), the most recent comprehensive treatment of Yiddish, there are two sentences about Yiddish in Hasidic communities in the introduction, and less than two pages about HY in the final chapter entitled “Sociolinguistics.”

In this section I have shown that HY dialects, the only ones that were directly transmitted by native speaking European immigrants and successfully maintained by four subsequent generations, have been essentially excluded
from the Yiddish linguistics literature. This is especially true for HY spoken in the U.S. It is instructive, in discussing the absence of a hypothetical research agenda, to consider a study by Jochnowitz (1968), which exemplifies the kind of research I am searching for. Conducted two decades after the mass immigration following World War II, this analysis compares the Yiddish of three generations of speakers from a Lubavitch community in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, where the two older generations are immigrants from NEY speaking regions and the youngest is native born. At the time, new models for analyzing linguistic variation were being introduced and refined by William Labov and his students (e.g., Labov 1965, 1966, 1972). In this historical context, Jochnowitz (1968) was uniquely positioned to address questions about variation, new dialect formation, influence from StY, and the impact of Yiddish-English bilingualism. The study cited here has never been replicated. Nor have there been any attempts to follow up and verify the accuracy of Jochnowitz’s predictions about language maintenance in this community.

**Anti-Hasidic Prejudice**

**Ruling Out Other Causal Factors**

Why was HY ignored in the field of Yiddish linguistics for most of the 20th century? I now turn to consider the possible roots of the passive exclusion of this spoken dialect as a viable object of linguistic analysis. In previous sections of this article I have described the ideologically-driven biases of early Yiddish scholars, which led to an emphasis on standardization and the privileging of Eastern European dialects. Peltz (1998) argues that the aforementioned prejudices resulted in a general inattention to fieldwork and a consequent lack of research on spoken Yiddish in the United States. He underscores the condescension to American Yiddish by prominent linguists Max Weinreich and Yudl Mark, and their refusal to grant it any status on issues of prescriptivism. For example, Peltz notes that Weinreich derided the simplified Yiddish of U.S.-born speakers, calling it “the language of the non-Jews,” and criticized the pervasive adoption of English loans, like ‘floor’ to replace the Slavic-derived podloge (Weinreich 1941, quoted in Peltz 1998:66). For Peltz, such attitudes and practices had far-reaching effects. He notes:

The political disposition of researchers hampered the potential for future studies on everyday conversation. The opportunities afforded by this kind of research, which uncover processes of languages, dialects and
cultures in contact, as well as common features of spoken Yiddish that hold for many places the world over and in various historical periods, has yet to be appreciated. (Peltz 1998:67)

My assertions about ideological prejudice overlap with those made by Peltz. However, I contend that Peltz’s critique misses part of the picture and thus does not fully explain the disciplinary trend. It seems to me that Peltz’s observation about a general scarcity of fieldwork indicates not so much a reluctance to do fieldwork per se, but rather an avoidance of the primary areas where such fieldwork was possible. In fact, a number of dissertations, including Peltz’s own, use empirical methods to examine spoken Yiddish in the U.S. (e.g., Green 1962; Levine 2000; Peltz 1988; Rayfield 1970), as do other studies published in academic journals (Katz 1980; Peltz 1987; Prince 1987; Ronch, Cooper, & Fishman 1969; Slobin 1963). None of these earlier studies, however, have focused on the Yiddish of Hasidim. I suggest that a more specific anti-Hasidic bias, inherited from secular Yiddishism and intensified by new resentments, pervaded the field and caused researchers to pass over the Yiddish dialects spoken, as it were, in their own backyards.

Since implicit bias is difficult to substantiate, the first step in my argument that the neglect of HY is due to anti-Hasidic bias will be based on the implausibility of other possible explanations. Let us first consider the issue of accessibility. Researchers interested in studying minority languages are often deterred by the geographical distance separating them from the target language community. Geographical distance, however, would obviously not have prevented graduate students of Yiddish in New York, and other linguists in the area, from incorporating American Hasidic dialects in their research agenda. Furthermore, under the influence of anthropologist Franz Boas and his students, a strong tradition for empirical research had developed at Columbia University. This approach was continued, with a more historical orientation, by André Martinet, who headed the Columbia department from 1947 to 1955, and by Martinet’s protégé, Robert Austerlitz, who also became a linguistics professor at Columbia and the co-editor, along with Uriel Weinreich, André Martinet, and William Diver, of the academic journal *Word*. Austerlitz was an ardent and accomplished field linguist and a strong advocate of descriptive linguistics and minority language documentation. Moreover, acknowledgment of linguistic heterogeneity and new methods for analyzing and quantifying variation and change were emerging from the Labovian school in the 1960s. In fact, Labov’s approach to social variation was honed under the tutelage of, and in collaboration with, Uriel Weinreich (Labov 2017). Cross pollination between Yiddish and sociolinguistic studies during this period of innovation should have inspired more Yiddish linguists to pursue empirically-based research.
One might also argue that HY was not socially accessible because of the insularity of Hasidic communities, a fact that ethnographic studies often emphasize (see, e.g., Belcove-Shalin 2012; Fader 2009; Heilman 1992; Kranzler 1995b; Rubin 1972, 1997). In light of this, the potential difficulty for acquiring useful linguistic data for analysis ought to be addressed. J. A. Fishman (1981:746) anticipates that “The major problem in studying Orthodox populations […] is that they are resistant to study even at the participant observation/ethnographic level.” Jochnowitz’s (1968) study, which centers on Lubavitcher Hasidim, does not, on its own, disprove this assumption, since this particular Hasidic group is known for its proselytizing and its consequent openness towards outsiders. More recent studies of HY, some of which involved fieldwork, do, however, demonstrate the feasibility of such ventures (e.g., Abugov & Ravid 2013a; Assouline 2010, 2015; Bleaman 2018; Fader 2009; Isaacs 1999b, 1999a; Kahan-Newman 2015; 2013b). Moreover, a number of scholars have also described their experiences conducting research in Hasidic communities (e.g., Assouline 2017; Berger-Sofer 1979; El-Or 1994; Epstein 1979; Fader 2009; Rosenfelder 2003; Belcove-Shalin 1988; Schulman 2016a; Shaffir 1985; Zalcberg 2005). Several common themes emerge out of the narratives cited here. One is that a degree of conformity to the community’s comportment standards by the investigator goes a long way towards overcoming resistance to participation. Another emphasizes the importance of conversing with prospective participants in a familiar dialect of Yiddish. Researchers also suggest cultivating relationships with individual community members and utilizing their social networks to expand the participant group. The aforementioned issues are hardly specific to HY, but rather are relevant for any fieldwork. Crucially, none of the projects referenced here suffered due to lack of access.

In the process of writing this article I also reached out to several colleagues who have recently conducted research on HY and inquired about their experiences (Abramac; Assouline; Bleaman; Kahan-Newman; Krogh, personal communication December 2017). Their testimonies echoed the themes cited in the literature. Several researchers stressed that having a well-regarded member of community vouch for them facilitated the data collection process. Additionally, since linguistic research does not necessarily require participant observation, my colleagues also mentioned the utilization of texts, professionally recorded lectures, and online forums as sources for linguistic data. Gabi Abramac, for example, employs a combination of methodologies, including ethnography, biographical interviews, and analyses of texts (print and digital), to explore language practices among Hasidim. Finally, recent studies show that although gender-segregated norms of the community make it difficult for investigators to recruit participants of the opposite gender, this challenge is hardly insurmountable (see, e.g., Bleaman 2018; Nove 2017a, 2017b).
In sum, the long period of neglect of spoken Yiddish dialects cannot be attributed to practical deterrents such as distance, a lack of precedents in field linguistics, or inability to gain access to the community. Below I introduce evidence that points to anti-Hasidic bias.

**Linguistic Bias**

Among Yiddishists, there is a reluctance to acknowledge HY as a Yiddish dialect group in its own right. Here I mention two of the most common critiques of HY, which are ubiquitous in conversational discourse among Yiddishists and Yiddish language enthusiasts, and occasionally also surface in more formal contexts.

**HY is Overly Anglicized and Germanified, and Therefore Inauthentic**

Before the Yiddishist movement, Yiddish borrowed liberally from co-territorial majority languages. Hasidim never adopted the purist stance taken up by leading Yiddishists in the modern era. As a result, some of the *daytshmerizmen* deemed “inadmissible” by Yiddishists like Weinreich (1968) are widely used. Speakers also retained in their new homelands, particularly outside Israel, their characteristic openness towards the majority language. In America, for example, which is regarded by Hasidim as a *malkhus shel khesed* ‘benevolent country’ because of its religious freedom and economic opportunities, no stigma is attached to the majority language (Poll 1965). Thus, it has been, from the start, open to the adoption and adaptation of English words and grammatical constructions, both to supplement and to replace Yiddish ones. For example, the Yiddish word *geyn* means both ‘(to) go’ and ‘walk.’ In HY, *geyn* is being increasingly grammaticalized as a future tense marker, similar to the English ‘going to.’ HY has at the same time adopted the English *walk* /vok/ to refer specifically to this mode of locomotion. It has been integrated both phonologically and morphologically, with /v/ instead of /w/; and with standard Yiddish conjugation (e.g., *ikh vok* ‘I walk,’ *du vokst* ‘you walk,’ *zi vokt* ‘she walks,’ *zey vokn* ‘they walk,’ and also *ikh gey vokn* ‘I will walk,’ *ikh gey geyn* ‘I will go’).

In contrast, Yiddishists are more inclined to create neologisms than to borrow words from English (e.g., *mobilke* for ‘cell phone,’ and *zikhele* for ‘selfie’). The recently published *Comprehensive English-Yiddish Dictionary* (CEYD) (2016) illustrates this propensity. In a recent interview with Isaac Bleaman,
Paul Glasser (Glasser & Schaechter-Viswanath 2016), one of the editors-in-chief of the dictionary, describes the editorial position vis-à-vis borrowings from German, and modernization:

Our philologists, and Yiddishists more generally, maintained that it was better to coin new words than to borrow foreign words, especially when it came to German and daytshmerish. Because if you borrow from German, eventually Yiddish just becomes pure German, which is what the maskilim wanted. [...] Not everyone is willing to accept the norms, but that was our approach. For example, it’s better to use older Yiddish words than newer daytshmerish ones. As for words that never existed before in Yiddish, we invented them, sometimes provided several options, and we hope that our audience accepts what we’ve provided. [...] But we tried to steer clear of English and German when possible because that would have been too easy. We tried to get inspired by all of the other languages at the same time. Or if we noticed that there’s a word shared by six languages, six European languages, we generally either incorporated it or used it to create something new. (Glasser & Schaechter-Viswanath 2016)

These remarks underscore how the privileging of European languages (with the exception of German) with respect to authenticity is ongoing; and how the divergence of HY from its ancestral roots and its natural development under language contact might cast shadows on its historical pedigree.

How can a “comprehensive” dictionary published in the 21st century not reflect HY? Co-editor-in-chief Gitl Schaechter-Viswanath remarks that it is “complicated” since “we don’t necessarily live among the Hasidim.” Glasser adds:

What should be taught? Hasidic Yiddish is constantly changing. [A standard] hasn’t yet emerged. Should we forget about gender marking in noun phrases just because [the Hasidim] are losing it? Should we include all of the English words that they use? You wouldn’t need a dictionary for that. If they say, “I’m going to parkn my kar,” you can understand that without a dictionary if you also know English. So, what is contemporary Hasidic Yiddish? I’m afraid that we won’t live to see the emergence, the formation of a Hasidic Yiddish that can be described in a grammar, included in a dictionary. (Glasser & Schaechter-Viswanath 2016)

There is an implication in these remarks that HY grammar is unsystematic, and therefore deficient, a charge that I explore in my next point. I would also
point out that it is common practice in lexicography to include loanwords, especially those that are in frequent use among speakers of the language. Thus, it is not at all far-fetched to expect to find in a Yiddish dictionary that self-identifies as “comprehensive,” the HY word for ‘car,’ kar [kar], alongside oyto, oytomobil, and mashin. The editorial decision to exclude from this selection of historical loanwords the most recent one reflects a reluctance to acknowledge that Yiddish, like other spoken languages, is changing. Burko (2017) notes such omissions, and points out that even well-established HY loanwords, like badern ‘to bother,’ that have been included in other contemporary Yiddish dictionaries, are oddly missing from CEYD. Finally, while detractors of HY allege that its speakers insert English words indiscriminately, lexical borrowing appears to be systemic (i.e., some words consistently appear in their English forms while others seldom or never do). HY borrowing patterns have not yet, however, been studied.

HY Has No Grammar or Its Grammar is Inconsistent
In spoken HY, the system of grammatical gender and case marking on noun phrases is no longer productive, though remnants of these remain as fossilized forms. In the written system, gender and case markings exist, but they are often used inconsistently. Jacobs (2005) reports on the apparent collapse in HY of the case and gender system, and other influences from English, based on analyses of written sources (newspapers). He notes, “One finds NPs with total mixing and haphazard case and gender markings, e.g., a classified advertisement asks: darf ir a hejmiš-ə farleslix-ər drajver ‘do you need a [Hasidic-FEM. ACC] reliable-MASC.ACC driver’” (Jacobs 2005:292–293). The overall impression given is that of a defective language with no grammar rules. Furthermore, the HY pronominal system is in the process of being simplified via the syncretism of accusative and dative case forms (see Nove, forthcoming). In a recent conversation with a leading member of a Yiddishist organization, the latter dismissed my findings about case syncretism, saying that Hasidic speakers “just don’t know how to speak properly.” Such stereotypes are also shared by language learners with limited knowledge of Yiddish. Avineri (2014) reports on the commonly held notion among both the Yiddish-language instructors and learners she observed, most of whom had little or no contact with Hasidim, that Hasidim have “bad grammar.” She cites a comment that an instructor added to the bottom of a sheet containing Yiddish terms and grammar rules: “Today’s khsidim–Hassidim–tend to ignore these rules” (Avineri 2014:26).

For these language purists, the ostensible “problem” with HY is that it is developing the way Yiddish did for roughly a thousand years prior to corpus planning: organically. Before the rise of Yiddishism, the language had been
transmitted unselfconsciously from generation to generation. For pre-modern speakers, Yiddish was functional as opposed to ideological. Centuries of contact with a variety of languages and dialects had enriched its lexicon and morphology and shaped its syntax. A writing system was in place long before activists saw the need for a standard orthography. Unlike StY, a dialect refined by scholars that reveals comparatively little about natural language development, HY has continued to evolve without intervention from above. This is precisely what makes it valuable for linguistic analysis. In its new contact environments, the development of HY, which is relatively free of prescriptivist constraints, can contribute greatly our understanding of the natural processes that motivate language change. As J. A. Fishman (1991b) acknowledges:

The fact that the future of the language depends disproportionately on Ultra-Orthodox users probably means that there will be less Yiddish corpus planning in the future (less need, less elaboration, and less compliance) than there has been in the past. This will not be an indication of weakness, but rather an indication of functional patterns that are closer to the traditional pre-modern uses of Yiddish, uses for which its past elaboration is supremely well suited. (Fishman 1991b:187–188)

By all accounts, HY seems to be following the trajectory of other Germanic languages. English lost grammatical gender in the 11th century. A number of Germanic languages (e.g., Swedish, Norwegian and English) and minority dialects (e.g., U.S.-based Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Texas German) have lost morphological case marking in noun phrases, pronouns, or both (see, e.g., Van Ness 1996). Moreover, research suggests that case syncretism in Germanic languages is positively correlated with intensive language contact and lexical borrowing (Allen 1999; Barðdal 2009). HY offers linguists the opportunity to study such change in progress, and thus to better identify the forces that drive it.

Social Bias

Irvine and Gal (2000) introduce the process of *iconization*, through which linguistic features or varieties become indelibly linked with a social group that utilizes them, to the extent that they come to represent, to listeners, the “essential nature” of that group. Lambert et al. (1965) propose that expressions of linguistic prejudice are often a proxy for covert attitudes about specific groups, since the former may be perceived as less offensive than the latter. Numerous studies that have utilized matched guise techniques, wherein listener attitudes are elicited using speech samples that differ only in a particular element or quality, have supported this thesis (e.g., Baugh 2003; Campbell-Kibler 2006;
Giles & Billings 2004). With these studies in mind, it may be instructive to explore the roots of possible anti-Hasidic bias, both historically and in the present. From the very start, most Yiddishists openly spurned religious observance and endeavored to dissociate the Yiddish language from religious Jewish identity. Chaim Zhitlovsky, one of the founding fathers of modern Yiddishism, asserted that religious belief was the main impediment to knowledge: “The Jewish religion [...] is a monumental barrier [...] separating the people from open-mindedness, and from their own national interests [...] it must be undermined” (Zhitlovsky 1911:199–200, quoted in D. Fishman 2010; translation mine). Moreover, activists hoped that Yiddish could serve both as a functional means to educate, enlighten and secularize the religious masses, and as an alternative to formal religion (Goldsmith 1976). That is the main reason why Hasidic Jews of Eastern Europe, who had been advocating for the use of Yiddish within their communities long before the rise of Yiddishism, did not participate in these pro-Yiddish crusades. As D. Fishman (2010) notes, “No rabbis were in attendance at the Czernowitz conference.” (translation mine). After World War II, Yiddishists largely mitigated their anti-religious rhetoric in the face of what has been described as a religious revival among American Jews. To some extent, this seeming attenuation of animosity towards religion and religious Jews can be attributed to a growing realization by Yiddishists that a purely secular environment may be inadequate for Yiddish language maintenance. To combat the rising ambivalence towards Yiddish by mainstream American Jews, secular-leaning schools began incorporating traditional elements of Jewish culture into the curriculum and news media actively courted religious readers (see Estraikh 2017; J. A. Fishman 1991b). Joshua Fishman, who identified as an Orthodox Jew, summed up these attitudinal shifts:

A century ago it seemed that it was necessary for Jews to choose either modernity or tradition, either secularism or religion, either their Jewish vernacular or the co-territorial vernacular, either the diaspora or Zion, either social mobility or social justice. Each choice inevitably involved a corresponding rejection. [...] But after a century of terrible suffering, at our own hands only slightly less than at the hands of murderers, the time for ingathering and integration has surely come. We now know we can combine both modernism and tradition, secularism and religion, diaspora-positiveness and Israeli positiveness, mobility aspirations and justice aspirations. (Fishman 1991b:338)

It bears repeating that post-war efforts by Yiddishists to integrate Orthodox Jews in the pro-Yiddish movement were largely pragmatic in the face of a
shrinking secular base. Moreover, the temperance of divisive, anti-religious rhetoric in public does not mean that these sentiments disappeared. Finally, owing to their self-segregation and alleged opposition to modernity, Hasidim largely retained their status as the radical “other” against which a more modern, inclusive American Jewish identity was fashioned. Because explicit negative evaluations of marginalized cultures are not socially sanctioned, such attitudes are seldom documented, but surface instead in subtle ways. For example, Kugelmass (1997:50) analyzes collections of photographs of Hasidic Jews and shows that “the Hasid represents not one facet of the family of American Jewry but a differentness that for most of us has passed and is therefore no longer part of lived reality.” The following quote suggests the pervasiveness of such views in the scholarly community:

In many of these smaller communities the Hasidim have harkened back to the village and small town semi-rural life which they knew in pre-War Europe. [...] it must also be realized that Hasidim lack a fully conscientious or ideological approach to the language; nor do they value the development of literature, poetry and other areas of modern language usage. For them, Yiddish is a part of a separate, Hasidic life. This may be a simple, primitive approach. On the other hand, it guarantees a vernacular existence for Yiddish that it may well lack in more accomplished circles. (J. A. Fishman 1991b:136–137, originally published in 1965)

If the word “primitive” and the allusion to being “less accomplished” are surprising in this context they are even more so coming from Fishman, a lifelong promoter of research on minority languages and one of the first scholars to call for studies on HY. In the following decades, Fishman’s perspective towards and understanding of HY clearly evolved. In Reversing Language Shift (1991a) he highlights the successful transmission and maintenance of HY in juxtaposition with the decline of its secular counterpart. Ten years later, Fishman (2001:88–89) not only criticizes scholars who recognize the vitality of HY yet “do not analyze its dynamics nor seek to understand the lessons to be learned

---

11 That Hasidim oppose modernity is a reductive and largely misguided belief, possibly prompted by their lack of participation in secular culture. For a more nuanced discussion on the Hasidic relationship with modernity, see Deutsch (2009) and Fader (2009).

12 The use of similarly judgmental terms to describe any other minority language, dialect or ethnolinguistic community (for example, African American English or Native American languages), would surely have been strongly condemned by the scholarly community. That Fishman’s description did not provoke such criticism is very surprising.
from that world,” but also denounces those whose prejudices against Hasidim lead them to discount the language:

All that secular Yiddishists see in the ultra-Orthodox is Neanderthal-like religious fanaticism that does not create (nor even know about, much less read) world-class Yiddish literature. Nor does it even aspire to modern concepts of social justice and egalitarian gender roles. These ‘fanatics’ and their children may speak Yiddish at home, at work, at the house of worship and in school, but their Yiddish is replete with anglicisms and Germanisms and follows medieval orthographic conventions. Thus, secular Yiddishists curiously reject that which lives and is growing while they cleave to that which is admittedly wilting before their very eyes […] (Fishman 2001:89)

That Hasidim take a purely utilitarian approach to Yiddish without necessarily attaching any value to it is a common misconception. In fact, recent studies by Soldat-Jaffe (2010), Fader (2009), and Glinert (1999), among others, show that although Yiddish is not fetishized by Hasidim, nor treated as the basis of a cultural identity, its status in Hasidic life goes well beyond the practical. An ideological commitment to Yiddish, which has its provenance in early Hasidism and was articulated by religious leaders for centuries (see Katz 1997), is currently discernible in Yiddish language primers, educational policies, and metalinguistic discourse in a variety of contexts.

For Yiddishists, the humiliating sting of failure, tinged with envy, may have provoked more anti-Hasidic resentment than did its history of secularism. That these black-clad Hasidim with no connection to Czernowitz, no knowledge of Sholem Aleichem, and no desire to participate in secular culture would become the de facto stewards of the language they had fought so hard to save may have been too much to bear. Friedman (2015:15) notes this in the introduction to his research on contemporary secular Yiddish: “As much as for many Yiddish enthusiasts […] the Ultra-Orthodox represent an internal “repugnant other,” many in the Yiddish world are often fascinated, if not at times perhaps a bit jealous, of those communities’ linguistic proficiencies.”

To summarize, corpus planning always requires defining and demarcating the outer limits of a language. Social factors play a major role in determining which dialects remain central and which ones are sidelined. I propose that for the inheritors of Yiddishism, Hasidim were a natural target for exclusion; and that to do so, they resorted to the same strategies that had been used marginalize Yiddish a century ago, essentially perpetuating their own form of linguistic chauvinism.
Yiddish Linguistics in the 21st Century: Orienting towards Hasidic Yiddish

The study of Yiddish has benefitted from the contributions of some of the foremost linguists, and the support of some of the finest academic institutions. Despite this head start, Yiddish linguistics was lagging behind the field as it entered the new millennium, arguably as a result of past prejudices. For example, notwithstanding major advances in acoustic analysis, not a single phonetic study had been published on any Yiddish variety. The grammar of four generations of HY speakers in communities across the globe had yet to be described. Although the circumstances for revisiting unanswered questions of the past were ideal, such research was not undertaken. Weinreich (1963), for example, puzzled over dialectal differences in final obstruent devoicing and phonemic length in vowels. Comparative acoustic analyses of HY, whose alleged ancestral dialect (CY) had both of those features, could shed light on those problems. In new language contact situations, a range of additional problems become relevant, as well. For example, how robust is the V2 word order in current spoken varieties? When did the grammatical gender and case systems collapse, and what internal factors are associated with these changes? Is the T-V distinction (the contrast between formal and informal in forms of address, e.g., ir vs. du ‘you’) being maintained under contact with majority languages (e.g., English and Israeli Hebrew) that lack this distinction? Are new patterns of word formation emerging under the influence of lexical borrowing? Noting this state of affairs, Katz (2006) remarks:

Future linguists will chuckle, seeing that instead of analyzing what is happening in living speech communities ‘around the corner’ that are open to empirical investigation, some Yiddish linguists have pre-occupied themselves with endless analysis of a ‘standard normative Yiddish’ that is native to (virtually) nobody. (Katz 2006:472)

Fortunately, a group of linguists, less encumbered by past ideologies, are ushering in a new era in Yiddish scholarship with scholarly emphasis on HY. Some of their studies employ traditional fieldwork methods, others are utilizing new technology for data collection and analysis. While a comprehensive review of recent literature is beyond the scope of this article, several will be mentioned here for illustrative purposes. Assouline (2010, 2014a) analyzes public lectures by Hasidic women and men, identifying innovative pronoun use that signals group membership and linguistic strategies that conceal changes to the traditional epistemic inequality between men and women. Data from a corpus of
Contact and Ideology in a Multilingual Community: Yiddish and Hebrew among the Ultra-Orthodox, Assouline’s (2017) recent book about the impact of language ideology on language use in multilingual Israeli communities. Krogh (2013, 2014) mines HY texts to explore maintenance and change in its morphology and syntax. Additionally, Krogh (2012) identifies three grammatical features that appear to be unique to HY: 1) replacement of a nominal indirect object by a prepositional phrase with far (as previously discussed in Berman-Assouline 2007; and in Assouline 2014b); 2) syncretism of grammatical gender and case; and 3) use of neuter pronouns to refer to masculine and feminine antecedents. Tracing these to the dialects spoken in the ancestral homeland of HY (Satu Mare, Romania), he suggests that some of these may not be recent innovations, but rather continuations of processes that began prior to World War II. Initiating sociophonetic explorations of Yiddish, Bleaman (2018) compares the duration of release bursts in word-initial stops /bdg/ of both male and female Hasidic and secular (Yiddishist) speakers and finds a tendency for prevoicing, a conservative phonetic feature, in the Yiddish of Hasidim. These findings disrupt accepted generalizations about linguistic purity and maintenance among Yiddishists. Bleaman (ms) also analyzes variable word order in particle verbs on an online Hasidic discussion forum, demonstrating how big data can uncover shifts in patterns of usage over time, within and across participants. Nove (2017a) conducts an acoustic analysis of the long and short vowels /i/, /u/ and /a/ produced by three generations of HY speakers, identifying differences in duration and changes in vowel quality across generations;13 and Nove (2017b, forthcoming) shows how recent innovation in the use of first person singular object pronouns by younger speakers are leading to a leveling of the accusative and dative cases in favor of the historical accusative. Finally, Kahan-Newman (1999, 2015) describes linguistic creativity among female HY speakers and analyzes discourse markers in the narratives of Hasidic speakers.

What does this reorientation reveal about the state of Yiddish linguistics, particularly with regard to the ideological constraints of its recent past? Scholars who observed a similar expansion in the scope of research in Yiddish studies more generally have termed it “postideological” (Glaser 2008; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2013; Krutikov 2002; Kuznitz 2014). I would caution against the interpretation of new trends, however progressive, as indicative of a transcendence of cultural or disciplinary ideology, i.e., as a move towards objectivity. Frakes

---

13 An important limitation of this study is the current difficulty in obtaining data from first generation speakers. Had such a project been undertaken twenty years earlier, the results might have been more revealing.
(2012:7), who defines ideology as “the social, political, cultural, and intellectual mentalité, that shapes the perception, i.e., the construction of reality, to the extent that the reality exists only as an effect of that mentality,” emphasizes that no study program is free of these constraints. Moreover, neutrality is particularly elusive in the social sciences, where the researcher is by her very humanity always implicated in the object of study. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2013:xi) points out that “languages are by their very nature highly charged phenomena even after the best efforts to purge them of their politics.” Instead, I would argue that what we are witnessing in Yiddish linguistics reflects recent trends in the field more generally. While the introduction of Labovian sociolinguistics opened the door for the systematic investigation of minority dialects such as African American English, it was only after Krauss’ (1992) urgent mandate for linguists to safeguard linguistic diversity that descriptive studies of marginalized and endangered languages became prevalent and accepted in the field. Postmodernist paradigms emphasizing hybridity and fluidity have also steered the field of sociolinguistics away from previous divided conceptions of language use, problematizing traditional notions of authenticity and challenging existing language-dialect oppositions. Such models enable, for example, investigations of the social work accomplished by language mixing and variation in HY, even as it is examined within the context of other Yiddish dialects.

An overview of the current disciplinary landscape reveals a lingering ideological bias, manifested as a dichotomous approach to the study of Yiddish. With few exceptions, scholars interested in “secular” Yiddish display no interest in HY, and vice versa (see, e.g., Shandler 2006a; notable exceptions are Bleaman 2018 and Soldat-Jaffe 2012). A dissertation by Safadi (2000) illustrates this approach. Safadi is interested in the influence of English on the Yiddish of bilingual speakers. The author issues the following disclaimer:

The study participants were restricted to secular Jews in the interest of obtaining coherent findings as well as by availability of participants. An exploratory survey of Hasidic Yiddish indicated that they should be tested separately because their patterns of Yiddish may differ from those of secular speakers. In addition, such a study might require a more religious-oriented approach to their participation. For these reasons, conclusions about language use and change across generations and sub-groups of Yiddish speakers must be tentative. (Safadi 2000:102–103)

In a previous section, the author questions the continuity of Yiddish among Hasidim in Israel, largely because of the extent of language mixing. Perhaps that is what the concern about “coherent findings” refers to. Two Hasidic
participants were allegedly dropped from the study due to inability to complete the experiment or lack of fluency. It is also not entirely clear, at least to this reader, what “a more religious-oriented approach to their participation” might entail.

Researchers may also blame the bifurcation of secular vs. Hasidic research on the cultural, political, and philosophical disparities between these two communities, which seem to be increasing over time. For example, recently there has been a resurgence of interest in Yiddish among young social liberals, many of whom identify as queer (N. Green & Benjamin 2017). Their social and political views stand in stark contrast to the traditional conservatism of Hasidim. Although political affiliations should have no bearing on linguistic science, they inevitably do. A recent dissertation by Friedman (2015) emphasizes this point. In his introduction, Friedman astutely points out that “the extant social, ideological, and linguistic barriers between [the secular and Hasidic] communities also mean that where one chooses to begin an analysis of Yiddish does much to determine the social relationships and cultural dynamics that will be made visible through that study” (Friedman 2015:17). He concedes that these ideological differences do not justify, from an analytical standpoint, the \textit{a priori} partitioning of ultra-Orthodox and Yiddishist speakers. And yet, his dissertation does precisely that. His search for \textit{Yiddishland}, i.e., the contemporary Yiddish world, begins and ends in secular Yiddish spaces. While Friedman’s focus makes for an insightful anthropological study, an inclusionary approach (as illustrated, for example, by Bleaman 2018), can do much to further our knowledge of the sociocultural impact on language use.

In his anthology \textit{Yiddish: Turning to Life}, J. A. Fishman (1991b:117) calls for the eschewal of the "mistaken, masochistic fixation" with the demise of Yiddish. Ten years earlier, in \textit{Never Say Die! A Thousand Years of Yiddish in Jewish Life and Letters}, Fishman (1981) had proposed that the future of Yiddish might well lie in the dialects spoken by Hasidim. In the conclusion to that volume, he declares where his own priorities as a Yiddish scholar would be directed. “If I could pick the population to monitor most closely (from the point of view of variance in connection with ongoing sociocultural processes), I would select the ultra-Orthodox in the United States and Israel” (J. A. Fishman 1981:746). A decade later, he restates this personal musing in the form of a mandate to others in the field. “[... ] the secular Yiddish apogee and nadir and the Ultra-Orthodox societal continuity that Yiddish has experienced in America are phenomena that every sociology of Yiddish must recognize” (J. A. Fishman 1991b:7). Fishman’s directive is echoed by Katz (2007:380), who proclaims, “The time has come for modern Yiddish studies to make the study of Hasidic Yiddish language and literature a primary focus of researchers specializing in the contemporary period.”
Fishman’s view of the future of Yiddish linguistics is coming to fruition. The 21st century movement to document and describe minority and marginalized languages and dialects is one that includes and supports Hasidic Yiddish. In this contemporary context, HY corpora can be created and a transcription system that reflects HY phonetics and phonology can be developed. With these tools in hand, the research questions raised above, along with many others, can be addressed with scientific curiosity and candor, avoiding the ideological pitfalls of the past, and illuminating the modern spoken language that is Hasidic Yiddish.

References


Assouline, Dalit. 2014b. “Language Change in a Bilingual Community: The Preposition far in Israeli Haredi Yiddish.” In Yiddish Language Structures (Empirical Approaches

The YIVO transcription system, required by many academic journals, fails to distinguish between long and short HY vowels, and misrepresents the way some HY vowels are pronounced. Additionally, the use of ‘kh’ to represent the /x/ sound is unrecognizable to HY speakers, who overwhelmingly transliterate it as ‘ch’ (which is the orthographical representation of this sound in Yiddish words that have passed into common English usage). For these reasons, I find the YIVO system problematic (see Bucholtz 2000 for a discussion of socially responsible transcription practices).


Hutton, Christopher. 1993. “Normativism and the Notion of Authenticity in Yiddish Linguistics.” In The Field of Yiddish: Studies in Yiddish Language, Folklore and


Manson, Steven, Jonathan Schroeder, David Van Riper, & Steven Ruggles. 2017. IPUMS National Historical Geographic Information System: Version 12.0 [Database]. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.


*Chaya R. Nove*

is a PhD student of linguistics, and a Mellon Humanities Alliance fellow at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. Her research focuses on variation and change in contemporary Hasidic Yiddish in New York.