

# The Erasure of Hasidic Yiddish from Twentieth Century Yiddish Linguistics

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# 2

# Introduction

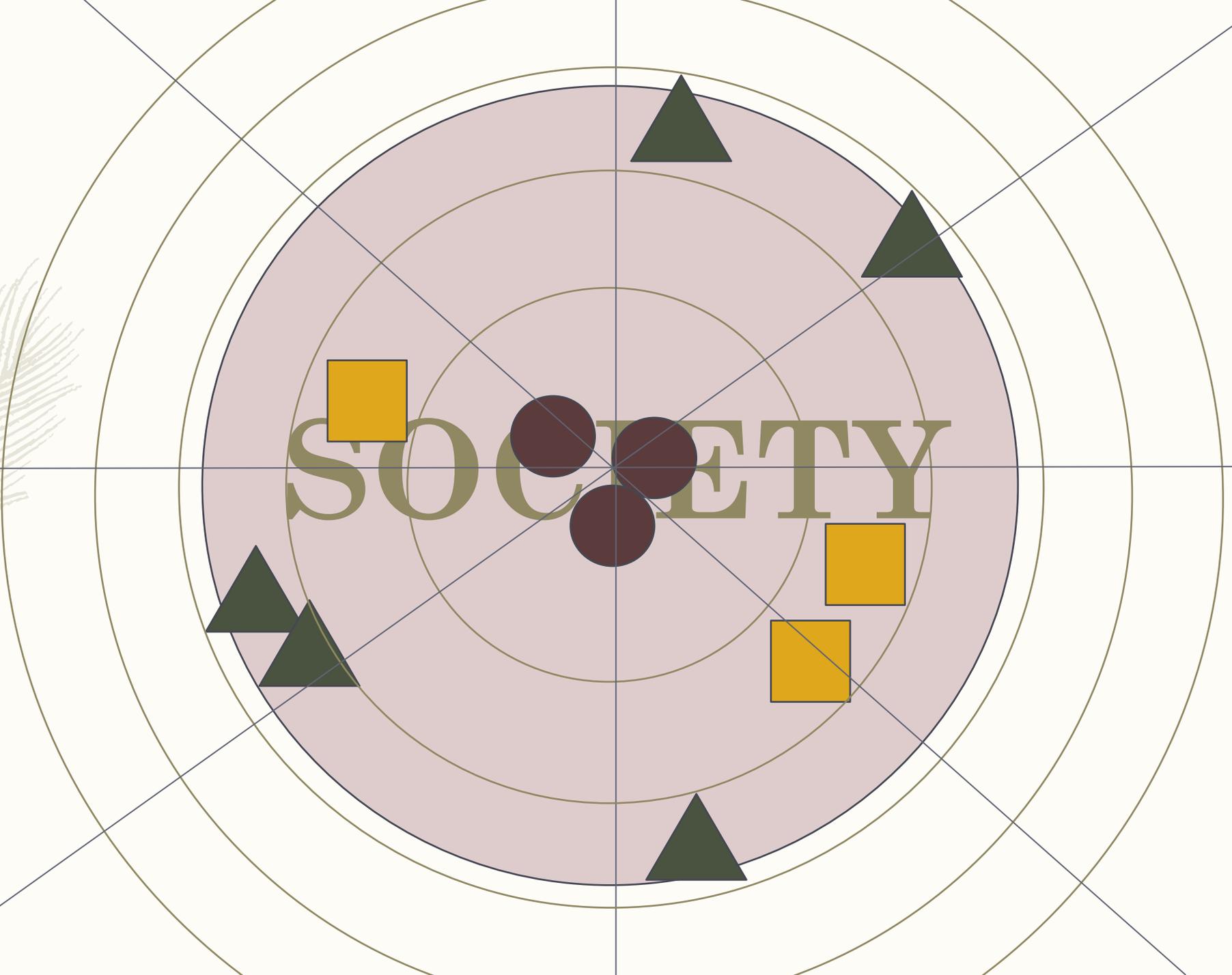
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- **Yiddish linguistics:** the scientific investigation of the organization of sounds, words, and meanings in the language system, as well as in the context of its cultural and social functions
- Grew out of Yiddishism
- 100 years after Czernowitz (1908 Yiddish language conference)
  - Eastern Europe nearly devoid of Yiddish speakers
  - Number of Yiddish speakers worldwide reduced to 10%
  - Diversity of dialects mostly gone
  - Native Yiddish speakers are almost exclusively Hasidim

3



Ideology: the full set of  
conscious and unconscious  
normative beliefs of an  
individual, group or society





# 4

# Organization

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1. Linguistic chauvinism and the rise of corpus planning
2. World War II era calamities and the search for “authentic” Yiddish
3. Demographic shifts and the passive exclusion of Hasidic Yiddish
4. Anti-Hasidic prejudice
  - I. *Ruling out other factors*
  - II. *Linguistic Bias*
  - III. *Social Bias*
5. Yiddish linguistics in the twenty-first century: orienting towards Hasidic Yiddish



# 5

# Linguistic chauvinism

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- Yiddishism was conceived as a corrective to
  - Medieval anti-semitism
  - Linguistic self-hatred
  - Assimilationism

See: Frakes, 2012; Gilman, 1986; Jeffrey Alan Grossman, 1992, 2000



# 6

# Corpus planning

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- Originally a movement of the common people, Yiddishists got caught up in **language planning** in their efforts to gain recognition from the majority culture
  - Cultivating literary Yiddish
  - Creating a standard (based on NEY/Lithuanian Yiddish)
  - Excising diversity
  - Standardizing orthography
- Institutional support: YIVO (1925)

See: Goldsmith, 1976; Kuznitz, 2014; Trachtenberg, 2008

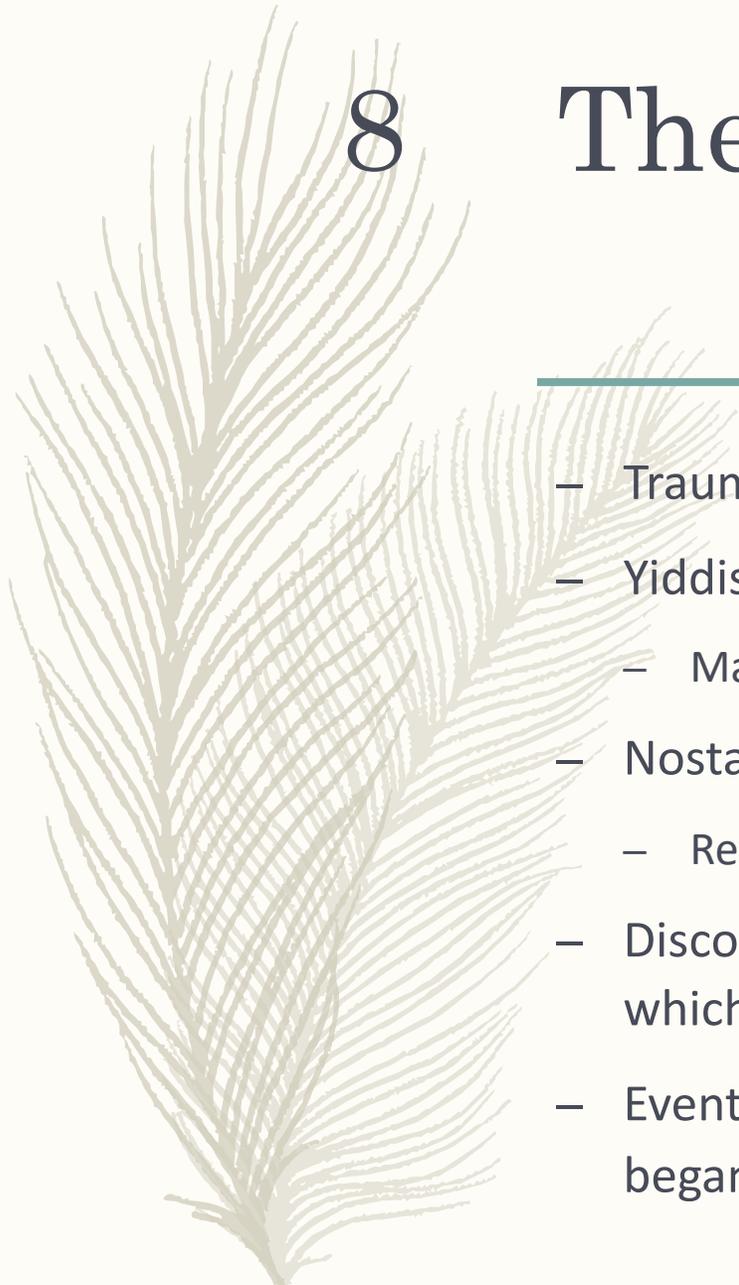


# 7

## World War II era calamities and their aftermath

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- Murder of about 5 million Yiddish speakers
- Loss of the Yiddish heartland
  - survivors become refugees
- Suppression of Yiddish
  - in U.S.S.R.
  - in Israel
- Linguistic shift away from Yiddish
- The university as the new *yidishe svive*
  - Hegemony of StY and YIVO transcription standard`



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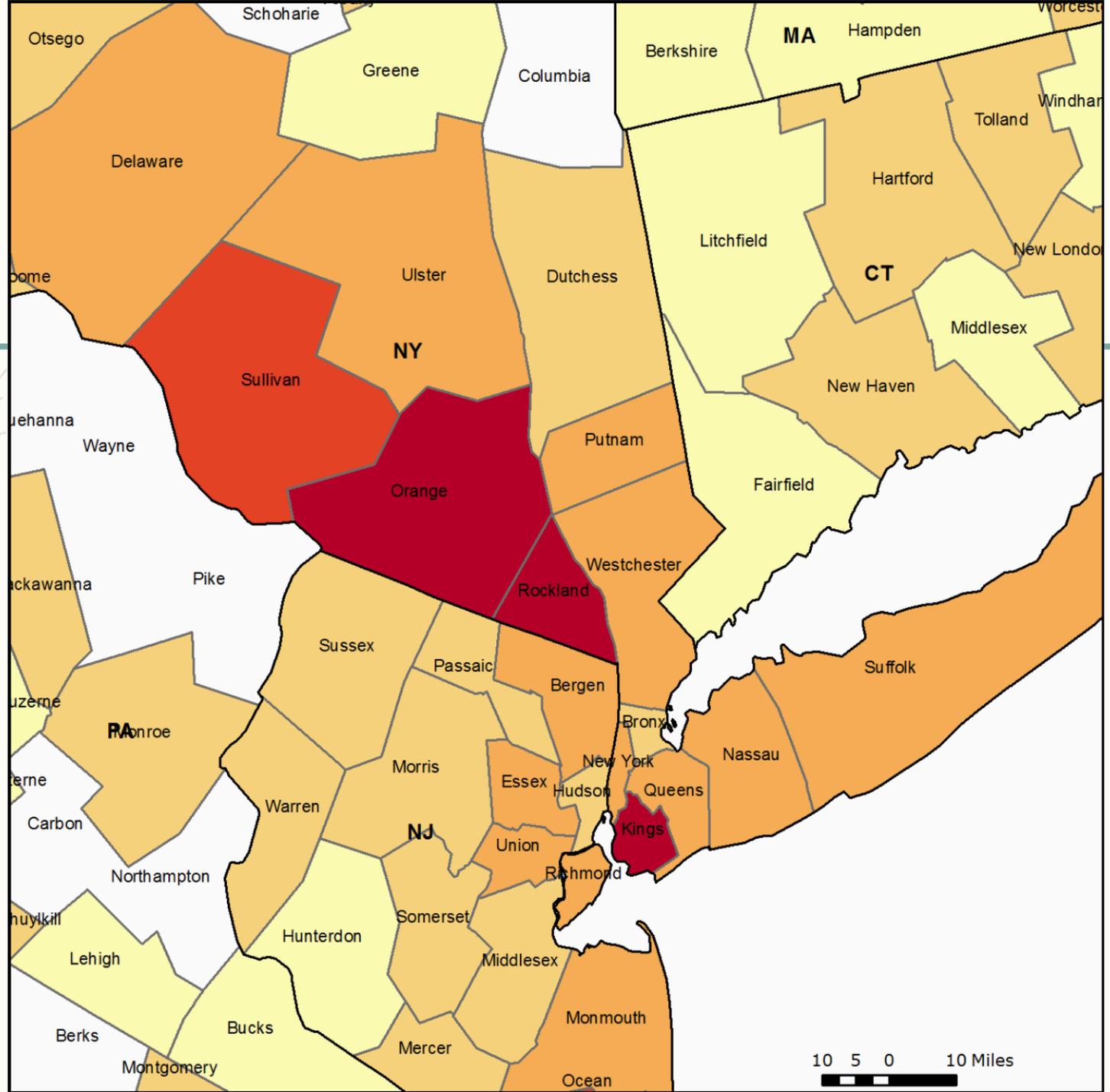
## The search for authentic Yiddish

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- Trauma and uncertainty led to anxiety and caused the field to turn inwards
- Yiddish linguists focused on **prescriptivism** and **stylistics**
  - Major developments: instructional text books, dictionaries
- Nostalgia led to **idealization of immigrants as “authentic” speakers**
  - Research projects focused on documenting the dialects of older immigrants
- Discourses about death of Yiddish diverted attention away from the spaces in which it was alive
- Eventually: scholars reached a consensus on Yiddish as a “postvernacular” and began discussing its “afterlives”



10





# 11

## Surveying the literature Part I

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- How many published studies of HY between 1950 and 1990?
- Jochowitz (1968): *Bilingualism and dialect mixture among Lubavitcher Hasidic children* (Has not been replicated or followed up in this community)
- When was the first graduate thesis out of a NY university, focusing on HY, completed?
- Fader (2000): *Gender, morality, and language: Socialization practices in a Hasidic community*
- When was the first doctoral dissertation from any US university, focusing on HY, completed?
- Fader (2000): *Gender, morality, and language: Socialization practices in a Hasidic community*



# 12

# Surveying the literature Part II

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- *International Journal of the Sociology of Languages* (IJSL) [why?]
- 18 articles about Yiddish between 1974 – 2014
- First one on HY: in 1999 thematic issue
- (Surprisingly, none of the 7 articles in 1999 issue are about HY in New York)



# 13

## Surveying the literature Part III

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- How many monographs on spoken HY?
- One, Assouline (2017): *Contact and Ideology in a Multilingual Community: Yiddish and Hebrew among the Ultra-Orthodox* (based on Israeli HY)
- In Jacobs (2005), most recent comprehensive monograph
  - Two sentences about Yiddish in Hasidic communities in the introduction
  - Less than two pages about HY in the final chapter entitled “Sociolinguistics”



# 14

## Possible factors for exclusion of HY

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- Already discussed: emphasis on **standardization** and **backward-oriented approach**, but surely there's more...
- The field is not devoid of empirical studies per se, but HY *is* conspicuously absent
- Practical deterrents, e.g., geographical distance?
- Lack of precedence for field linguistics or empirical studies of spoken languages?
- Lack of social access?
- (see Assouline, 2017; Belcove-Shalin, 1988; Berger-Sofer, 1978; Fader, 2009; Kugelmass, 1988; Rosenfelder, 2003; Schulman, 2016)



# 15

## Anti-Hasidic prejudice Linguistic bias I

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I. *HY is overly anglicized and Germanified, and therefore polluted and inauthentic*

WHY?

- The *anti-daytshmerism* crusade never penetrated Hasidic circles
- Yiddishists are inclined to create neologisms rather than to borrow words from English (e.g., *mobilke* for ‘cell phone,’ and *zikhele* for ‘selfie’)
- HY borrows liberally from English to supplement or replace Yiddish words
  - Ex. ‘*gey*’ has been grammaticalized as a future tense marker (like English ‘going to’)
  - ‘*vok*’ (from ‘walk’) has been adopted to refer to the specific mode of ambulation
  - Thus: *ikh vok; du vokst; zey vokn; but also ikh gey vokn, nisht forn*

**HOWEVER: borrowing is not random, has always existed in Yiddish and is natural in language contact situations**



# 16

## Anti-Hasidic prejudice Linguistic bias I

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“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)



17

# Anti-Hasidic prejudice Linguistic bias I

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“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)



18

# Anti-Hasidic prejudice

## Linguistic bias II

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II. *HY has no grammar or its grammar is inconsistent*

WHY?

- System of grammatical gender and case marking on noun phrases is no longer productive HY (fossilized forms remain)
- In the written system, gender and case markings exist, but are often used inconsistently
- HY pronominal system is being simplified via the syncretism of accusative and dative case forms (see Nove, 2017)



# 19

## Anti-Hasidic prejudice Linguistic bias II

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NOTE, HOWEVER:

- HY is following the trajectory of other Germanic languages
- English lost grammatical gender in the eleventh 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
- Research suggests that case syncretism in Germanic languages is positively correlated with intensive language contact and lexical borrowing (Allen, 1999; Barðdal, 2009)

**MOST IMPORTANTLY:** HY offers linguists the opportunity to study such change in progress, and thus to better identify the forces that drive it.

# Anti-Hasidic prejudice

## Social bias

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- *Iconization*: process by which linguistic features or varieties become linked with the social group that utilizes them, and come to represent (to the listener) the “essential nature” of the group (Irvine and Gal 2000)
- Lambert et al. (1965) show that expressions of linguistic prejudice are often a proxy for covert attitudes about a group
- Negative remarks about a group are not PC, but criticism of the language often sanctioned
- Numerous studies use matched guise techniques (listener attitudes are elicited using speech samples that differ only in a particular element or quality) to reveal social biases



21

# Anti-Hasidic prejudice

## Social bias

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- Secular-religious dichotomy was attenuated after W.W.II, following a religious revival
- The new American Jewish identity was inclusive, but Hasidim remained outside of it, the perpetual “other”
- That Hasidim succeeded where Yiddishists failed, created a resentment, tinged with some envy



22

# Anti-Hasidic prejudice

## Social bias

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“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.”

(Fishman, 1965)



# 23

## New research paradigms in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

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- Assouline (2010, 2014) analyzes public lectures by Hasidic women and interviews on telephone “hot lines,” and identifies, among other things, an innovative use of pronouns to signal group membership.
- Data from a corpus of prerecorded lectures also form the basis of *Contact and Ideology in a Multilingual Community: Yiddish and Hebrew among Ultra-Orthodox*, Assouline’s (2017) recent book about the impact of language ideology on language use in multilingual Israeli communities.
- Krogh (2012b) identifies three grammatical features that appear to be unique to HY and traces them back to the dialects spoken in the alleged ancestral homeland of HY (Satu Mare, Romania). His findings suggest that what appear to be recent innovations may actually be continuations of processes that began prior to World War II.

In what are possibly the first acoustic studies of Yiddish:

- Bleaman (2016) compares the duration of release bursts in word-initial stops /bdg/ of both male and female Hasidic and 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 among Yiddishists.
- Nove (2017a) conducts an acoustic analysis of the long and short vowels /iua/ produced by three generations of HY speakers, investigating possible differences in duration and quality across generations
- Nove (2017b) shows how recent innovation in the use of first person singular object pronouns by younger speakers is leading to syncretism of the accusative and dative cases.

- “Postideological?” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2013; Krutikov, 2002; Kuznitz, 2014)
  - Not so fast
- No science is objective, and social sciences are particularly prone to ideological biases
- Moreover, there is evidence that these biases still exist
  - Manifested in a dichotomous approach
- Reorientation reflects recent trends in the field

# Conclusions, cont.

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In 1981, Fishman wrote:

“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.”

Ten years later, he restated this perspective as 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 (1991b).”

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