Phonetic Contrast in Unterland Yiddish Vowels

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The Study

• **Focus on:** Unterland Yiddish
• **Objective:** Investigate phonetic differences (duration and quality) between long and short stressed vowels /i/, /u/, /a/
• **Data:** Holocaust testimonials recorded by USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archives
• **Hypothesis:** Primary difference between long and short vowel of each pair is duration
Delimiting the Unterland Region

• Yiddish speakers in Austro-Hungarian territories used the terms *Oyberland* and *Unterland* ([İntərland] in CY) to refer to a culturally relevant east/west division.

• U. Weinreich (1964:249-250):
  – Narrowly: “the plain around the upper Tisa river near the confluence of its tributaries, the Bodrog-Laborec and the Someş” - Mukačev and Maramureș-Sighet are central
  – Broadly: “all of Transylvania, and even the mountainous portions of E. Slovakia and Carpathorussia”

• Krogh (2012:483):
  – Narrowly: “the formerly Hungarian counties of Szatmár, Máramaros, Ugocsa, Bereg and Ung”
  – Broadly: “the rest of Transylvania and the mountainous parts of East Slovakia and Carpathian Ruthenia”
Why is it interesting?

1. Migration
2. Politics
3. Geography
4. Culture
5. (Relative) lack of existing research
6. Relationship to contemporary dialect(s)
What we know about Unterland Yiddish

• Belongs to the Central Yiddish (CY) dialect group
• Lot of variability due to linguistic and dialectal diversity
• Like CY, preserved feature length in /i/, /u/, and /a/
  – Examples:
    • /ziːn/ ‘son’ and /zin/ ‘sun’
    • /ħa:nt/ ‘today’ and /hant/ ‘hand’
    • /ʃtruːf/ ‘punish’ and /ʃluf/ ‘sleep’
• Cross-linguistically, the acoustic cues of such contrasts vary
  – (length, spectrum, both, etc.)

LSA 2021
What do we know about the length contrast in CY?

- U. Weinreich (1963:341): long vowels are monophthongs [i:] and [u:]
- Birnbaum (1979:220) transcribes short /i/ and /u/ as [ɪ] and [ʊ]
- U. Weinreich (1964) notes the “maximally high quality” of short [i] in Unterland Yiddish
  - transcribes the word genimen (‘took’) as [ganiman]
New York
Hasidic Yiddish
24 speakers

Mean normalized formant values plotted by generation, with F2 on the x-axis and F1 on the y-axis
N = 1367
Regression Modeling

Quality:

  Significant difference in ED for /i/ and /u/ pairs between generations 2 & 3

Duration:

  Significant difference between generation 2 & 3 for high vowels and between 3 & 4 for /a/

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