Innovation and Change in the New York Hasidic Yiddish Pronominal System

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Introduction

Focus: Synchronic variation/innovation in the New York Hasidic Yiddish (HY) pronominal system

Two leveling processes:
1. ACC/DAT distinction singular paradigm
   -mir (1SG) & dir (2SG) → mikh & dikh
2. Verbal agreement morpheme in plural paradigm
   -mir (with 1PL) & -ts (with 2PL) → -(e)n

Methods: Sociolinguistic interviews lasting between 13 - 195 minutes, average duration 79 minutes
Total: 55 hours

Data & Methods

Participants: 50 native HY speakers, raised in a NY community or living in one for the past 20 years

Results

Statistical Analysis: Logistic regression with INNOVATION as dependent variable

INNOVATION in OP: ACC pronoun (mikh or dikh) in DAT context
INNOVATION in VA: agreement morpheme -(e)n with 1 or 2 PL pronoun

Summary and Conclusions

Statistical analyses of both datasets show a significant effect from age with progressively more innovation by younger speakers, indicating change in progress. There is a main effect of gender, which should be interpreted cautiously as gender in this community is confounded by other factors, including language dominance. Speakers with at least one parent whose L1 is not Yiddish seem to be instrumental in both leveling processes. This suggests externally-driven change, with language (and dialect) contact at the level of individual households leading to structural change in the language of the community. That both changes result in more English-like patterns also implicates contact on the level of the individual (linguistic) speaker. Additionally, speakers raised in Rockland County display a greater tendency for innovation than those raised in other New York communities, and this effect is more pronounced in verbal agreement. This may be because Rockland County communities, which were historically more diverse, were likely the sites of more language contact than were the older, more established communities in Brooklyn or the homogeneous community in Orange County.

Contact-induced leveling resulting from migration is well documented (see e.g., Borton-Ricardo, 1985; Kensvall, 2006; Trudgill, 1986). Predictions about outcomes rely on the sociohistorical details of migration (e.g., motivation, distance, political hierarchies, community size, isolation from/integration with the origin and host society). As this preliminary analysis shows, the circumstances under which Hasidic Yiddish was transferred to the U.S., and its status as a minority language in New York, make it especially useful for studying the driving forces of change.