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"THIS IS THE LANGUAGE THAT UNITES US":
THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF YIDDISH IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

ABSTRACT:
Yiddish ('Jewish' in Yiddish) has been spoken by Ashkenazic (European) Jews since 1000 C.E., but in the Holocaust most of its speakers died. There has been a recent resurgence of interest in the language as many of the remaining native Yiddish speakers have been disappearing. Miriam Koral, UCLA Yiddish lecturer, has stated that Yiddish is a "threatened" language. As one Yiddish-speaking group member noted, "*S'iz far interesirt dos Yiddish…s'iz noch nisht noch far lirn a shprach, siz far lirn di gontse cultur.*" ("It's interesting Yiddish…it's not only losing a language, it's losing the whole culture").

California has been central in the recent language revitalization movement. In fact, California has more International Association of Yiddish Clubs (IAYC) member groups than any other state or region worldwide. Southern California Jewish identities can be fruitfully examined through the lens of Yiddish, for it plays interconnected roles in multiple generations of both Yiddish- and non-Yiddish speakers' lives.

METHODS:
This research was collected in a Southern California senior center in 2000-2001 and used ethnographic methods including participant-observation, audio-recordings, and interviews. The researcher met weekly with and interviewed a group of Yiddish-speaking women at the center, in addition to participating in various Southern California Yiddish cultural groups and activities.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:
-Why and when does one use Yiddish?
-What are the functions, especially identity-serving functions, of the use of the language?
-Does the content of the conversation have anything to do with the use of Yiddish?
-When one speaks Yiddish, what does this index (historical relationships, humor, common ancestry)?
-When Yiddish is used in combination with other languages, does this type of usage index a differing relationship to either the content or the language choices?
-How do the members view the use of their language as constructing a "we" and a "they" code?
-What do the speakers think and believe about their own and the speech communities' language use?

PARTICIPANTS		
Name, Age, Birthplace	Common Languages	Other Languages
Gertrude 83 NY	English, Yiddish	Spanish
Miriam 68 Poland	English, Yiddish	Polish, Spanish
Myra 86 NY	English, Yiddish	Spanish
Frieda 84 Illinois	English, Yiddish	Spanish
Etta 86 NY	English, Yiddish	Spanish
Klara 67 Ukraine	English, Yiddish	Ukrainian, Russian, German
Fay 70 Pennsylvania	English, Yiddish	

LANGUAGE USAGE WITHIN THE DOMAIN OF FAMILY: LANGUAGE SHIFT

G : Gertrude ; N : Netta; E: Esta; F: Frieda; M: Myra

01 G: with your family.
02 N: *Mein mame un mein bruder. Ich bin gevayn mit mein mishpokhe mein*
       My mom and my brother. I was with my family my
03   *brider mein shvester un mein*
       brothers my sister and my
04   (0.2)
05 E: [*muter*]
       [mother]
06 G: [*muter*]
       [mother]
07 N: *Mein mame.*
       My mom.
08 F: *Un dayn tate? fater?* Pick one.
       And your dad? Father?
09 G: *Er hot nisht a fater.*
       He (sic) doesn't have a father.
10 N: *Un mein* aunt and uncle.
       And my aunt and uncle.
11 F: [*tante*]
       [aunt]
12 E: [*tante*]
       [aunt]
13 M: [*tante*]
       [aunt]
14 G: [*tante*]
       [aunt]
15 N: *un* uncle.
       and uncle.
16 G: Uncle…
17 F: Uncle is a- how do you say uncle?
18 M: *A ferter.*
       An **uncle**.

METALINGUISTIC AWARENESS:

   01 N: *Ich hob gezayn* Old Sacramento *mit a sach*, like, old buildings.
         I saw (sic) Old Sacramento **with many,** like, old buildings.

…

   02 E: That's a tough one.
   03 M: We'll have to find out. *Farbrikn, farbrikt* we'll have to find out..
         We'll have to find out. **Building, building** we'll have to find out.
   04 G (to M): Do you know how to say buildings in Jewish?
   05 M: *Hayze, alte hayze.*
         House, old house.

…

-> 06 M: I only know talking conversation, that you can have a
   07   conversation with somebody, 'cause that's how I learned it..
   08 M: I think you would call it *farbrikn.*
         I think you would call it **building**.
   09 M: Yeah, that's it...*farbrikn.*
         Yeah, that's it…**building.**
   10 G: I've never heard that word before.

CODE SWITCHING AND CODE MIXING

Example 1:
01 K: *Mein nomen iz Klara. Ich bin gekumn kein Amerike elef yor tzurik.*
    My name is Klara. I came to America eleven years ago.
02 G: Oh! She's a new one!

Example 2:
01 G: *S'iz hobn ge*fixed.
     It was (sic) fixed.

Example 3:
01 M: *S'iz hob ge*passed.
     It passed (sic).

Example 4:
01 F: *Ich hob ge*promised Netta.
    I promised Netta.

LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES:

Anonymous:
"We won't give you the *pure* Yiddish here."

Myra:
"A language is dead to you if you don't speak it."

Gertrude:
Yiddish is "connected to who I am talking *to*, that's it. Of course I feel Jewish, though I'm not religious."

Frieda:
"I don't consider Yiddish as part of my lifestyle, but I grew up that way and I am proud to say that I'm Jewish. And, yet what surprises me, my siblings, they grew up in the same house as me, one brother is older than I and the other three are younger, and they don't know as much Yiddish as I do…but maybe it's because I use it here, a little more."

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS:
The present analysis highlights the role of metalinguistic awareness, language shift, code switching and mixing, and language ideologies among a group of Yiddish-speaking women in their late 60s – late 80s. Within this setting, Yiddish expressed content and indexed specific relationships with Jewish/ethnic identity, family background, and childhood experiences. In addition, the specific context of the Yiddish-speaking group itself provided an environment in which the women socialized the researcher into an appreciation of and respect for the language, its history, and its speakers.

As Fishman states, a Jewish language is any language "that has some demonstrable function in the role-repertoire of a Jewish sociocultural network" (1981:5-6). Over time, the function of Yiddish within Jewish communities has shifted. Presently, Yiddish serves as a central index of a common cultural group experience. In all of its forms (lexical items, speech style, all levels of language usage, music, and poetry), Yiddish serves to unite the Southern California Jewish population such that they experience community within the complex multicultural context of California.

Since collecting this focal research, the researcher has continued to be involved in the California Yiddish cultural community. She has developed an intergenerational Yiddish language partnership program, matching UCLA students in Yiddish courses with Yiddish speakers in the Southern California community. In addition, she is working closely with Yiddishkayt Los Angeles to develop a fellowship program aimed at "fostering Yiddish cultural literacy among young adults".

WORKS CITED:
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