# Yiddish across borders: Interviews in the Yiddish ultra-Orthodox Jewish audio mass medium

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

This study analyzes phone interactions in Yiddish that are broadcast by telephone to ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities through off-hook services called "hotlines". Yiddish, a minority language, is the native tongue of most hotline speakers and marks their communal affiliation within the ultra-Orthodox world. We explore the instrumentalities of one Yiddish hotline in order to ascertain features that facilitate its role as a membering medium for its community. We show how participants use this medium to index who is – and who is not – a community member via language decisions that reflect language ideologies and maintain community boundaries; interviewees index their membership by linguistically accommodating interviewers; and hosts, on occasion, change language to ostracize an interviewee. We also explore the problematic status of Modern Hebrew for this community.

This study analyzes a type of spoken communication with linguistic, interactional, and technological characteristics that challenge many generally accepted assumptions in the domain of communication studies. The language of communication at issue is Yiddish, invariably a minority language, one that by many accounts should have disappeared, but has remained alive, even serving as a first language in major groups of a particular community – that of the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Community (UOJC henceforth). The notion of a community may be elusive in this respect, as the UOJC stretches across at least three continents, America, Europe, and Asia (Israel), comprising numerous different religious streams and groups, both across and within geographic boundaries. And, while it is a highly religious community, some streams and groups are more observant than others. Moreover, the notion of a *speech* community is also complex, with varying degrees of Yiddish maintenance and use in different UOJC groups, as well as distinct Yiddish dialects that may even be mutually unintelligible (Isaacs, 1999b: 114; Fader, 2009: 98). At the heart of the present investigation, then, lies the unique combination of the following conflicting factors: a language that is both a first and native language yet is always secondary in the geographical and national area in which it is used, on the one hand, and a community that is almost too diverse to be regarded as a single entity, yet shares a strong ethno-religious core.

The interactions we study are telephone interactions, conducted both over the phone and currently also in voice-over internet protocols (such as Skype). These phone interactions are then broadcast via phone or Skype to whoever calls the number in which these calls are stored, which allow the interactions to reach wide audiences who can listen to, but not

themselves join in with them. In short, we discuss interactions that occur through an interpersonal medium used for mass broadcast purposes in a community that is transnational, far from unified, yet shares a spoken minority language. This combination of factors makes the domain of UOJC hotline communication in Yiddish an intriguing and even unique area for communication research.

A simple and obvious illustration of the tensions that result from all these factors is found in the name of the communicative arena we study. In the US the arena in question is called by the loan term "hotlines", pronounced in Yiddish as in English, indicative of the status of Yiddish as a minority language. In Israel the arena is labeled by the Hebrew-Yiddish term *kavéy ha-náyes* 'the news lines' (lit. [HEB]lines-of the[HEB]-[YID]news[YID]). Thus, the same communicative arena has two different names in two different locals but among the "same" community of users. These names also illustrate the relations of this community to its surrounding languages, English (in the US and the UK) and Hebrew (in Israel), a point which is central to our discussion.

Following Hymes (1972), we root our work in the theoretical tradition of the Ethnography of Communication. We define interviews as a particular speech event, based on questions and answers and uniquely formatted for mass media productions,[1] and adopt Hymes's ideas on the Ethnography of Speaking, to analyze Yiddish hotline interviews in terms of his notion of *communicative competence* in examining the relations between communication, talk, and community, as well as some elements of his idea of the SPEAKING mnemonic.

Hymes suggested the SPEAKING mnemonic to describe speech events holistically, by describing their Settings, Participants, Ends, Action sequences, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms and Genres. After describing the settings and the participants in general terms, we delve into the instrumentalities of one hotline, since instrumentalities, according to Hymes, deal with both the code of communication and the medium used to communicate.

We also take into account Philipsen's (1989) notion of *membering* as "an act by which speakers themselves hear their own speech as similar to the speech of a particular group of others" (p. 82). Given that, as noted, defining the character and boundaries of the UOJC as the community under discussion here is no easy matter, notions such as communicative competence and membering, in both their wider, sociological and even ideological sense, as well as in the more specific sense of linguistic details, provide useful points of departure for the analysis undertaken in the present study. We therefore answer the question what are the features of the Yiddish hotline that facilitate its role as a membering medium for its community. In our analysis of the recorded interactions we focus on processes of linguistic accommodation performed by both interviewers and interviewees, regarding accommodation as a key mechanism in drawing community boundaries, indexing who is a community member and who is not a community member. We also use observations from Conversation Analysis (CA) to examine the sequential use of language, focusing on the actions and their achievements, together with Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which focuses more on the relational aspects of the interaction. Thus, whereas CA focuses on actions and their constructions (Heritage, 1984; Atkinson and Heritage, 1988), CAT (Giles et al., 1991) gives us a stronger tie to the "inter" part of the interaction. The combination of the two frameworks gives us a holistic view of these dimensions in the interaction (see also Gallois et al., 2016). In addition, we take into account Bell's concept of audience design (Bell, 1984), suggesting that, besides interpersonal accommodation between the two speakers, the interviewees may also try to accommodate their speech to the approximated speech of the hotline's audience.

Data collection was based mainly on one particular hotline, taking into account meta-communicative features of hotlines in general as discussed in various UOJC online forums and Israeli ultra-Orthodox newspapers, as well as some materials published, in Yiddish and Hebrew.

The hotline analyzed here – *Kol Meváser*, a Yiddishized version of the Hebrew expression 'voice heralding = a voice bringing good tidings' – provides access to more than 1500 interviews (as of February 2017). Over 100 of these, along with interviews from several other hotlines, were selected at random and monitored to identify participants and locations of the interactions, topics of discussion, and other relevant features. Interviews were also transcribed, and provide the material for illustrating our findings on both linguistic and communicative characteristics of the interactions presented below. Although we use close sequential reading of the interactions, we do not intend to contribute to the understanding of their structural elements, as is often done in conversation analytic research, but rather to the features of the speech community and its construction, following the ethnography of communication tradition.

## 1. Settings: one community across three continents

Ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities worldwide maintain a unique set of norms and conventions, which they perceive as the only genuine Jewish way of life. In the cities and countries that they live in, these communities keep to secluded neighborhoods, sustain separate education systems and public institutions, and strive to minimize the impact of the modern world (distinguishing between modern culture and values, which are forbidden, and instrumental components of modernity, which are accepted (Shilhav, 1991: 33)). The conservative nature of these communities is manifested by their old-fashioned East-European style of dress, as well as their choice to adhere to the language of traditional, now deceased, East-European

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[1] We do not discuss the structural features of interviews (cf. Blum-Kulka (1983) or from a conversation analytic perspective Clayman and Heritage, 2002). Weizman discusses interviews and their participants' roles (2008) from a pragmatic perspective (see also Jucker, 1986).