

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

Journal of Pragmatics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma

Globalization, conflict discourse, and Jewish identity in an Israeli Russian-speaking online community

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Globalization
Online discourse
Impoliteness
Digital diaspora
Israeli Russian
Jewish

ABSTRACT

Using the frameworks of (im)politeness and identity (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Sifianou, 2017), this article examines multi-participant polylogal conflict discourse between Jewish ex-Soviet migrants residing in different countries. For Russian-speaking ex-Soviet migrants, Jewish identity is important and at the same time often hotly contested. Migrants use a variety of impoliteness strategies, which are analyzed using Culpeper's 1996 classic impoliteness framework as modified by Dobs and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2013). Specific impoliteness strategies are then related to the migrants' transnational identities. I argue that the choice of linguistic code is crucial for both the construction of conflict and for identity work in a globalized context. Migrants have multiple linguistic choices at their disposal, both hegemonic and global (Modern Standard Russian; Hebrew), and non-hegemonic, specifically the highly localized immigrant vernacular, Israeli Russian. I argue that refraining from sharing this common vernacular constitutes an Ignore, Snub the Other impoliteness strategy where Israel-based forum members disaffiliate from a Moscow-based forum member.

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1. Introduction

As groups of migrants move across the globe due to political changes, calamities, and new economic opportunities, globalized mediated communication is changing the way that members of diasporic communities engage with each other through language. Transnational migrant communities form and develop, linguistically adapting to accommodate members communicating from different locations. Instead of switching to a single code, migrants can often draw upon a heterogeneity of practices to perform identity through (im)politeness and conflict discourse.

This phenomenon is richly attested (though still under-researched) in the so-called New Jewish Diaspora: the migration and resettlement of Russian-speaking, Jewish¹ people after the fall of the Soviet Union. These post-Soviet

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¹ There is much debate in the literature about whether these migrants are “really Jewish”, and what that may mean (cf. detailed discussion in [Rebhun, 2016](#)). The state of Israel, and many Israel-based researchers, distinguish between migrants who are halachically Jewish (i.e. have a Jewish mother), and others. People of paternal Jewish descent might not be considered ‘Jewish’ by some researchers even if they identify as Jewish. According to the Israeli Law of Return, relatives of halachically Jewish people are allowed to immigrate to Israel regardless of whether they are of Jewish descent or not. Migrants who are not halachically Jewish (but are Jewish-identified) as well as non-Jewish relatives of Jews are often marginalized or overlooked by researchers. In this article, “Israeli Russian-speaking ex-Soviets” is inclusive of all migrants of the ex-Soviet Great Wave, whether they are halachically Jewish or not. “Jewish” in this article refers to people who self-identify as Jews and by extension have an investment in cultural, religious, or ethnic aspects of Jewish identity.

Jewish Russian-speaking diaspora members live in countries like Israel, Canada, the US, Germany, Australia, England – and many have also remained in the countries of the former Soviet Union (Tolts, 2016); yet others are returnees, having lived in Israel, Europe, or North America before choosing to return to their birth countries (Rebhun, 2016; Sapritsky, 2016). Over a million people arrived in Israel from the former USSR during the so-called Great Wave of migration to Israel (1989–2000) (Fialkova and Yelenevskaya, 2007).

In this article, I examine how Jewish ex-Soviet migrants negotiate their identities through online conflict discourse. I explore an instance of verbal conflict in an online community for ex-Soviet immigrants to Israel – souz.co.il. Based on this data, I argue that the choice of linguistic code is crucial for both the construction of conflict and for identity work.

Issues of globalization and (im)politeness intersect when members of a diasporic community use both globalized and highly localized linguistic resources for (im)politeness and identity work. This is true in our case, with speakers having access to linguistic choices that are hegemonic and global (such as Modern Standard Russian), or highly localized: the Israeli Russian vernacular. Conflict discourse is performed through the mobilization of Hebrew and Israeli Russian linguistic elements, as well as through *refraining* from using Hebrew elements, in order to negotiate issues of Jewish Russian transnational immigrant identity.

In my discussion, I make use of frameworks of (im)politeness and identity (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Sifianou, 2017). I use Culpeper's 1996 classic impoliteness framework, which draws on Brown and Levinson's 1987 influential politeness theory; more specifically, I use Dobs and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2013's modified version of Culpeper's framework to discuss concrete strategies used by the interlocutors, and relate the usage of these strategies to identity and, where applicable, to facework.

The processes of affiliation and disaffiliation play an important role in the polylocal, group construction of conflict. The use of a localized, group-specific linguistic resource (the Israeli Russian vernacular) by an outsider is a bid for insider status; the insiders reject this bid for affiliation over the course of the conflict. I argue that by refusing to use a common linguistic resource, Israeli Russian vernacular, with the outsider constitutes a case of the Ignore, Snub the Other (ISO) strategy identified by Culpeper (1996, 2005), which has implications for constructing a globalized Jewish identity.

2. Ex-Soviet Russian-speaking Jewish identity

Jewish identity is often contested and fluid for ex-Soviet people of Jewish background. While Judaism is a cultural commonality for most Jews around the world, this has not been the case for ex-Soviet Jews, especially those of Ashkenazi (European) descent. Many expressions of Jewishness were prohibited and/or severely repressed in the Soviet Union (Kheimets and Epstein, 2001), leading to the formation of what some scholars call a “thin” Jewish Soviet culture (Ro'i 2016:139).² Religious education was disallowed and teaching Hebrew, the language of religious observance, was punishable by jail time.³

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Jewish religious activity emerged as a source of fascination, inspiration, community, and a resource of symbolic capital in the countries of the new Jewish diaspora. In these countries, ex-Soviet Jews could avail themselves of newly established Jewish organizations. Hebrew, a formerly forbidden language, is now often used as a means of claiming a Jewish identity.

On the other hand, in Israel, many of the immigrants found themselves in opposition to the religious establishment as well as to local Israelis, who perceived the ex-Soviet immigrants as insufficiently Jewish due to the ex-Soviets' disconnect from the Hebrew language, Zionism, and Jewish religious practices. According to Dekel-Chen (2016), Jewish activists in all of the receiving countries “were disturbed by the immigrants' lack of a conventional religious identity” (Dekel-Chen, 2016:83). In Israel, Jewish religious practices are highly important to the identity and daily life of its Jewish citizens; lack of this knowledge created antagonism toward the migrants. On the other hand, these attitudes from their Israeli Jewish hosts produced antagonism and anti-religious sentiment among the immigrants, especially in the early 1990s.

As time passed, the immigrants adapted to their new environment, acquiring a knowledge of Hebrew,⁴ familiarity with Jewish religious practices, and experience living in a country without a clear separation of church and state: a country where

² Personally I find that the “thin” vs “thick” culture description as applied to the Soviet Jews often correlates with other negative views of this marginalized group. For many researchers, the “thick” aspect seems to refer to the practice of Judaism as a part of Jewish culture. However, Jewish secular culture is a phenomenon that predates Soviet Jewishness. Not all Jews define themselves in relation to Judaism, and what constitutes Jewish culture and identity is often disputed within the group itself. Many Soviet Jews felt culturally Jewish even when disconnected from Jewish religious practices. For them, Yiddish remained symbolically important even after the shift to Russian was complete (Shternshis, 2006; Verschik, 2007, 2016).

³ Russian Jews also underwent language shift from Yiddish to Russian. Yiddish, the language of daily life and secular culture, was the native language of many Ashkenazi Jews before the Russian revolution of 1917. 97% of the Jews spoke Yiddish by the end of the 19th century (Estraiikh 2008) – but by the last Soviet census, 90% of Ashkenazi Jews self-reported as native speakers of Russian (Remennick, 2003). Under the Soviet regime, many Ashkenazi Jews spoke or were at least familiar with Jewish Russian, a non-hegemonic post-Yiddish vernacular which incorporates many Yiddish features (Verschik, 2003, 2007, 2016). However, most Soviet Jews placed emphasis on their command of the Russian literary standard, which provided them with symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991).

⁴ Levels of Hebrew knowledge may vary according to the immigrants' age, work situation, living situation, time elapsed since immigration, whether they have school-age children, and multiple additional factors. However, due to the immersion situation, most Israeli-based Russian-speakers are able to be conversational in Hebrew and possess at least some Hebrew literacy as well. For an in-depth discussion on the Hebrew vs Russian situation see Kopeliovich 2011; Niznik 2005, 2011.

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