Yiddish endangerment as phenomenological reality and discursive strategy: Crossing into the past and crossing out the present

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ABSTRACT

Yiddish has been spoken by millions of Ashkenazic Jews since approximately 1000 C.E. Over the past two centuries, the number of Yiddish speakers within secular Jewish "metalinguistic communities" has diminished while numbers in Hasidic Orthodox communities have been growing. Yiddish is therefore unique in the "endangered language" landscape, challenging prevalent classifications used to describe levels of language vitality. This article analyzes Yiddish "endangerment" as a phenomenological reality and a discursive strategy. Metalinguistic community members engage in 'nostalgia socialization', crossing temporal boundaries to connect with authorizing sources of past European Jewish communities; they create alliances with an imagined past while maintaining boundaries with a distant present. Yiddish therefore illuminates how languages are constructed through communities' experiences of loss, fragmentation, and recreation.

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"So I really wanted to honor them and hear their voices, and it's just really heartbreaking that in a few years there won't be any native speakers left and we will all speak like […]like the flat American academic accents which is so different." – Deborah, May 11, 2010[1]

1. A paradox

Is it possible for a language to be 'endangered' when in certain communities its number of speakers is increasing? This seeming paradox will frame the following discussion of Yiddish in the contemporary world, embodied on the one hand by growing numbers of Yiddish speakers within some Orthodox Hasidic communities (as discussed for example in Assouline, 2010; Barriere, 2010; Fader, 2009; Tannenbaum and Abugov, 2010) and on the other hand by the ongoing maintenance of Yiddish as an 'endangered' language within secular educational contexts. Yiddish is currently estimated to have 200,000–500,000 speakers who use it as a daily language and approximately 2 million who have some language ability worldwide (Benor, personal communication). Considering these numbers and the stark differences in engagement with Yiddish within these communities, Yiddish is unique in the 'endangered' language landscape (in contrast to other languages that may fit more squarely into current endangered language paradigms). This paper will consider the multiple ways that for members of

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[1] In transcriptions of interactions I have used Jefferson's transcript notation (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984). When transcribing interviews and online sources the analysis focuses on the content and therefore only lexical items are included.

the secular Yiddish metalinguistic community the language's endangered status is both a phenomenological reality and a discursive strategy. The analysis highlights the ways that language vitality and endangerment are *relational* phenomena, drawing upon individuals' relationships to the language and communities' relationships with one another.

2. The Yiddish metalinguistic community and its dimensions

This project develops a theoretical and empirical framework for the model of what I have termed a *metalinguistic community*, a community of positioned social actors engaged primarily in discourse *about* language and cultural symbols tied to language. Building upon the notions of speech community (Dorian, 1982; Duranti, 1997; Gumperz, 1968; Morgan, 2006), linguistic community (Silverstein, 1998), local community (Grenoble and Whaley, 2006), and discourse community (Watts, 1999), *metalinguistic community* provides a novel practice-based (Bourdieu, 1991) framework for diverse participants who experience a strong connection to a language and its speakers but may lack familiarity with them due to historical, personal, and/or communal circumstances. The Yiddish metalinguistic community is primarily concerned with talking *about* Yiddish language and culture, as opposed to talking *in* Yiddish.

This research identifies five dimensions of metalinguistic community (discussed in further detail in Avineri, 2012): 1. socialization into language ideologies as a priority over socialization into language competence and use, 2. conflation of language and culture, 3. age and corresponding knowledge as highly salient features, 4. use and discussion of the code as primarily pedagogical, and 5. use of code in specific interactional and textual contexts (e.g., greeting/closings, assessments, response cries (Goffman, 1978), lexical items related to religion and culture, mock language). The project explores the innovative ways that metalinguistic community members engage in what I term *nostalgia socialization* into an imagined nationality (Anderson, 1983) of the Jewish diaspora, demonstrating the central role of language as identity maker and marker in multilingual contexts. For many metalinguistic community members, Yiddish is experienced as an 'endangered' language, as evidenced by many of their comments in pedagogical contexts and during their person-centered interviews. In this way, Yiddish is *phenomenologically endangered* for these community members by virtue of the lack of exposure many members have to the language. In addition, there are multiple ways that Yiddish is discursively maintained as endangered within these contexts.

3. The model of metalinguistic community: historical foundations

The model of metalinguistic community builds upon previous research identifying how communities can be built around patterns of language use. Though originally defined by Gumperz (1968, p. 43) as "any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage", speech community has been more recently conceptualized as "the product of the communicative activities engaged in by a given group of people" (Duranti, 1997, p. 83). In addition, Morgan (2006, p. 16) demonstrates how "speech community represents the location of a group in society and its relationship to power…[which] is important to understand how social actors move within and between their speech communities". Dorian (1982) has also considered variation within speech communities, introducing terms such as low-proficiency "semi-speaker" and "near passive bilinguals". What is distinct about a metalinguistic community is that positioned social actors reflexively consider the code as a symbol of individual identity and group membership.

There are previous notions of communities surrounding language that highlight shared ideologies. Silverstein (1998, p. 407) makes a distinction between speech community and linguistic community, noting "the speech community is the context of emergence, sustenance, and transformation of distinct local language communities". He defines linguistic community as "groups of people by degree evidencing allegiance to norms of denotational…language usage" (Silverstein, 1998, p. 407). Friedman (2009) notes,

> What unites a linguistic community is not a set of language practices but a set of language ideologies that define what counts as legitimate language. In the modern nation-state, this language is the national language(s) that has been standardized and legitimated through institutionalization in government, media, and education. (p. 2)

The metalinguistic community is also distinct from the notion of a linguistic community, for the actors in a metalinguistic community may or may not simultaneously be learning to use the language. The members of a metalinguistic community are also engaged in a socialization process into language ideologies, but these ideologies may or may not focus on legitimate language usage and instead focus primarily on participants' metalinguistic practices.

In his discussion of language policies in Spain, Del Valle (2007, p. 256–7) emphasizes the "common set of metalinguistic practices" that produce a "highly choreographed discourse of verbal hygiene that defines and hopes to control the nature of Spanish". He (Del Valle, 2007) demonstrates that the discourse's internal consistency and frequency in institutions resonates with the notion of

> a discourse community: a set of individuals who can be interpreted as constituting a community on the basis of the ways in which their oral or written discourse practices reveal common interests, goals and beliefs, i.e., on the degree of institutionalization that their discourse displays' (Watts, 1999, p. 43)" (p. 247).

In some respects, Watts' concept of a discourse community is similar to that of a metalinguistic community in its focus on commonly-held beliefs that are expressed through fairly standardized discourse. However, in a metalinguistic community,