The Multilingual Apple

Languages in New York City

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Yiddish in New York: Communicating a culture of place[1]

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1. Language: a lens on the landscape

Yiddish writers, readers and speakers have long exhibited a special relationship with New York, the city that was home to so many East European Jewish immigrants and their descendants. Especially for those who reached New York and never left it, the nature of the language and culture of their ethnolinguistic community was inextricably tied to an evolving sense of place, that place being the city streets where Yiddish was heard. We have decided to explore that unique connection between citizens and their city, communicators of Yiddish and their community. For it is true, New York is unlike any other place in America in its centrality for Yiddish-language users. We set out to find out what we know about life in New York City as experienced by those who live it, in Yiddish.

The somewhat unconventional perspective we have adopted for this essay on Yiddish language and Yiddish life in New York City assumes a stance that we share with Schieffelin, that language can be a lens through which to search for clues about "the nature of culture and how cultural knowledge and beliefs are transmitted..." (1986: 183). In that vein, we have focused on the demonstration of conceptualizations about the conditions of their New York environs by those who express themselves in Yiddish. In other words, collecting what Hummon has called "commonplaces about communities" (1990: xiv) seems an important, if as yet uncharted, approach to understanding how language and place intersect. Analyzing language about a place and in a place, both, can help reveal the panoramas that people are prone to incorporate into their sense of self and their sense of community. Hummon summarizes this viewpoint aptly when he states that "community identity answers the question, 'Who am I?' but does so by countering, 'Where am I?' or, more fundamentally, 'where in the landscape of community forms do I belong?' It identifies the individual with place..." (1990: 142). We intend to survey, in a necessarily exploratory way, the articulation of allegiance on a grass-

roots level, rather than offer the standard overview of the formal agencies representing Yiddish language in the city of New York.

The topic of Yiddish in New York has been treated to date mainly in terms of the contributions of the immigrants to Yiddish culture in the field of literary creativity (Harshav 1986; Wisse 1988; Howe 1976; Sanders 1969; Teller 1968) and in such institutions as the Yiddish press (Soltes 1925; Doroshkin 1969; Howe 1976) and the Yiddish theater (Cypkin 1986; Sandrow 1977). Lifson (1965: 502) recounts how in 1925–1926, thirteen Yiddish theaters, including three in Brooklyn, competed for popularity among New York theater audiences. In the 1990s, these New York-based cultural institutions in Yiddish survive, although drastically diminished. The Folksbiene Theater presents one production each season and performances by other groups can occasionally be viewed. Two weekly newspapers are published, *Der algemeyner zhurnal*, and the once vibrant immigrant daily, *Der forverts*. The former was founded in the 1970s and currently attracts a larger circulation than its competitor, appealing to Orthodox and especially Hasidic Jews. A variety of literary and political journals still circulate (Fishman 1985: 335), including the *Tsukunft*, the longest running periodical in Yiddish literary history, having celebrated its one hundredth anniversary in 1992.

We have chosen to turn our attention to "local knowledge" (Sanders 1993: 114) that Yiddish speakers in New York City exhibit, in their vernacular, about the intimate attachment that exists between their venue and themselves. From our own previous research on culture and communication in communities of immigrants and their children (Kliger 1990; Peltz 1989), feelings of rootedness and emotional attachment to place loom high in explaining identity changes. We agree with Davis (1991: 6) that:

> people who share a common relation to the place of residence – a place where they have their homes, raise their children, and relate to each other more as neighbors than as coworkers – can and do forge solidarities on the basis of interests that are inherent in that relation to that place.

If the relation to New York City streets, neighborhoods, physical and human markers is central for the personal and group identities of Jewish residents, we are interested in how that connection is expressed in the ethnic mother tongue and how it is observed in the ways that communication is organized. Residence in New York creates a uniquely shared identity for the city's Yiddish speakers, and that community also exists as a collectivity of shared hopes and emotional bonds (Suttles 1972: 265; Bender 1978: 7; Varenne 1986).

Yiddish has been associated with Ashkenazic Jewry for most of its history, both arising with beginnings in the Germanic lands of the ninth century. Eventually these Jews moved eastward from Western and Central Europe, being centered in Poland, Ukraine, Belorussia, the Baltic states, Hungary and Rumania by the eighteenth century. Further emigration brought Yiddish from Eastern Europe to the Western Hemisphere, Palestine (later the state of Israel), South Africa and Australia.

Although the first immigrants to arrive in New York City in the seventeenth century were Sephardic Jews, deriving from Spain and Portugal, by the middle of the eighteenth century Yiddish-speaking Jews were the majority (Doroshkin 1969: 49). The mass immigration of East European Jews to the United States took place between 1881 and 1924, mostly from the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires. These Yiddish-speaking Jews were concentrated in the large urban centers, with two-thirds of the Jews in the ten largest cities, 1.6 million in 1927–1928, living in New York (Doroshkin 1969: 68). Smaller waves of Yiddish-speaking immigrants arrived after World War II and again starting in the 1970s, when the Soviet Union eased its emigration policy.

Yiddish language evolved over the centuries as a fusion of elements modified from several stock languages. The main components of Yiddish are Germanic, Semitic (derived from Hebrew and Aramaic), and Slavic (derived from Czech, Polish, Ukrainian and Belorussian). Within European society, the Yiddish vernacular coexisted in a diglossic relationship with Hebrew, which was generally limited to sacred functions and religious texts. Although the Germanic component is predominant in spoken and written Yiddish, the Slavic component is integrated in the language, including in constructions that are Germanic in form but modeled after Slavic usage. As is the condition of language in general, Yiddish is differentiated geographically and exhibits a variety of societal registers. Yet, despite differences, a speaker in its Northwestern extreme in Amsterdam could be understood by a speaker in Odessa in Southeastern Europe. The Yiddish heartland of Eastern Europe that thrived for hundreds of years was decimated by Nazi Germany during World War II.

Few immigrants who arrived during the period of mass immigration are alive today. The waves of subsequent immigration were markedly smaller. Therefore, the American Jewish population today consists of an aged population of children of immigrants, the second generation, and larger numbers of third, fourth and subsequent generations. Qualitative studies show an intense exposure to Yiddish during the first years of life for the children of immigrants, but this is not followed later on with

active Yiddish speaking (Peltz 1991). The following figures for individuals claiming Yiddish as mother tongue demonstrate fluctuations: 1.8 million in 1940, an estimated 1.0 million in 1960, 1.6 million in 1970, an estimated 1.2 million in 1979 (Fishman et al. 1985: 130, 147). The authors (Fishman et al: 1985: 146) who compiled these statistics explain that for Yiddish, as for other major languages, the second and third generation increased their claims of mother tongue usage from 1960 to 1970. However, "Yiddish, which in 1970 had pulled out of its steep 1940 to 1960 decline, registered a 24% drop in 1979, thereby once again achieving the rare distinction of being the most rapidly declining non-English mother-tongue among 'the big six' (indeed, among non-English mother tongues in the USA as a whole)".

Of the 1.6 million Yiddish mother-tongue claimants in 1970, 0.7 million were from the state of New York, reflecting the geographic concentration of the original immigrants (Fishman et al. 1985: 183). In 1982, 1,168 local religious units reported Yiddish usage, as did 422 schools (Fishman et al. 1985: 200). These institutions are found largely in the more religiously observant Orthodox sphere of Jewish life. In general, the demands of Jewish religious observance are associated with concentrated residence, commercial establishments that provide food that complies with religious dietary requirements, and nearby institutions for prayer and study. In the early part of the century, Boro Park in Brooklyn became a residential area for observant Jews (Moore 1992: 259). After World War II, other areas in Brooklyn, such as Williamsburg and Crown Heights, became centers for Hasidic Jewish life.

Hasidism, a form of fervent religious devotion characterized by intense emotional prayer and spiritual transcendence, arose in eighteenth century Eastern Europe largely in opposition to the strict text-based study methods of rabbinic Judaism. It became the dominant form of Jewish Orthodoxy in large parts of Eastern Europe. After World War II, New York City, and especially the borough of Brooklyn, became a world center for Hasidic communal life. Living in tight-knit insular subgroups, Hasidim had many children and built neighborhood institutions where Yiddish was most often the language of discourse. Different Hasidic adherents produced their own weeklies and monthlies, and published primers for teaching their children.

Fishman (1982, 1983), in his essays devoted to the more recent demographic data regarding Yiddish, has underscored that it is in the ultra-Orthodox Hasidic sector that Yiddish is the first language of family life, of the neighborhood synagogue and of the school. In contrast to these

daily language-based activities transmitted from generation to generation in the primary institutions of the community, secular Jewish circles sponsor the more intermittent Yiddish-language activities of secondary institutions. The occasional theatrical performance or the publication of printed periodicals do not preserve the intergenerational bond in the same enduring way. Thus, the oscillations in the census data showing an increase in Yiddish mother-tongue declarations in 1970 and a decrease in 1979 can be accounted for by the articulation by secular younger people, first, of their dissatisfaction with American society through an expressed interest in ethnicity and, subsequently, a relative lack of ethnic identification. In the year 2000, it is predicted that one million individuals in the United States will report Yiddish as their mother tongue. However, in terms of sustained language maintenance and use, Fishman (1983: 3–4) highlights the 26,000 youngsters in Hasidic circles, mostly in Brooklyn. In the year 2000, they will have increased their numbers by 20% since 1985, and it is for them that Yiddish will be the first and likely only language. The larger proportion of non-Hasidic Jews in the city, as they become distanced from the immigrant generation, turn less to Yiddish for their linguistic and communal needs.

The question of how members construct the dimensions of their community and, then, communicate those parameters to themselves and to others is a process worthy of investigation. What matters in these conversations is the meaning of such discourse, the topic to which we now turn. This was underscored in a study of contemporary Jewish clubs in New York City formed by immigrants with a common link to a European hometown (Kliger 1992: 119–136). It was revealing, for example, to monitor members' assessments of their communities of origin. Post-World War II refugees who settled in New York in the 1940s and early 1950s spoke of their Polish hometown cities of Lodz or Warsaw in terms and tones quite distinct from their compatriots who had settled in the U.S. earlier. Their children and grandchildren cannot necessarily accurately depict the geographical borders or historical legacy of the Old World communities to which they are tied by virtue of their cultural and linguistic ancestry. To understand these developments, it is important to note the context that gives contour to the continual discussions about identity. For each cohort, their Lodz is a different place. But, then, so is the New York City they each live in. As one urban historian of New York has concluded: "To move to a new neighborhood – to change the view from the kitchen window – meant to exchange an old ethnic identity for a new one, to abandon tradition, for modernity" (Moore 1992: 253). And

it is, after all, within the boundary of New York, the new world community Jews joined and helped build, that the struggle to give voice to multiple visions of self occurs. This compelling challenge is faced by many ethnic enclaves, generation after generation, as they try to make sense of reality.

2. *At home in New York: language as the link*

In trying to find the language(s) to represent their loyalties as Jewish New Yorkers rooted in the Yiddish-centered milieu of the Ashkenazic Jewish tradition, immigrants were quite innovative. In many areas of the city that they populated, "the Yiddish language of the street, home, and business, allowed Jews to develop a sense of Jewish identity..." (Sorin 1990: 16). The dominance of Yiddish conferred a cohesive sense of neighborhood. Although, as Moore (1992: 255) cites, "Jewish neighborhoods on the fringes of the city shared a common ethnic 'language' of cultural pluralism", Yiddish language and culture ensured the unique Jewish flavor of the surroundings that the Jewish residents themselves constructed, in the traditions of all "imagined communities" (Anderson 1991). Some sections in New York's boroughs even became associated with Yiddish names. Manhattan's Riverside Drive, for example, was known as "Allrightniks Row" when East European Jews came to the area. The slang term resulted from the back and forth interpolation between the English word "allright" and the American Yiddish phrase "olraytnik" that evolved to indicate a person who had succeeded financially and was now comfortably set up. When the place name "Allrightniks Row" was utilized, it was meant to reflect the arrival and all-encompassing presence of upwardly mobile Yiddish speakers on Manhattan's upper west side (Allen 1993: 238). While Riverside Drive was transformed into Allrightniks Row, Second Avenue in lower Manhattan was distinguished as the Yiddish Broadway, since many Yiddish theaters flourished there in the early part of the twentieth century. This similitude between New York landmarks and the signposts of Jewish New York was extended by tagging the Cafe Royal, the social hub of Second Avenue's theater crowd, the Yiddish Sardi's (Allen 1993: 61).

The practice of assigning Yiddish alternatives to official place names was in fact quite common in Europe. Although the propensity to generate Yiddish-language versions of neighborhoods or streets in America is less apparent, unauthoritative names were designated by Yiddish speakers for

some of the regions where they resided. Particularly among the immigrant generation, a folk toponymy emerged that is notable for the ways in which it reveals attitudes and attachments of a people in social and linguistic transition. A listing of such appellations published in 1973 includes the following: *levone* [Yiddish word for moon] instead of Livonia Avenue in Brooklyn, Essex Street in Manhattan becomes *esikstrit*, borrowing the Yiddish word for vinegar. In another example, the inhabitants of Mosholu Parkway in the Bronx spoke of the "*parkvey* that was Moyshele's" [Yiddish name] (Shekhter 1973: 56–57). These adjustments should not be seen as mere mispronunciations, but rather as cleverly (if not always consciously) construed strategies whereby immigrants could bring their worldview to bear on their accommodation to New York. Irving Howe has said that some of "the difficulties experienced in learning English were not merely technical, like mastering the "th" and "w" sounds or coping with the chaos of English spelling; they were basically cultural" (Howe 1976: 227). We tend to agree. Indeed, it seems that adjustment to New York culture is more readily facilitated when newcomers can wander through the city streets, including figuratively and linguistically, without suddenly being forced to abandon the intimacy and security of familiar Yiddish speech.

The immigrant language can serve as the cultural anchor for a world in transition, both for the immigrant and for the children. Yiddish is the signal of the intimacy of home, of endearment, of the parents who take care of you. This nurturance extends into the larger circle of family, friends, fellow immigrants from the same hometown and neighbors, all the way onto the streets of the neighborhood. Moving beyond the "nurturing neighborhood" (Sorin 1990) can be a frightening experience, even for those children who are born in New York City.

Henry Roth's classic novel of immigrant life in New York, *Call It Sleep* (1991 [1934]), is a saga of an immigrant child, David, from the time he arrives in the United States at age two until age eight. The work is a linguistic marvel because Roth builds a complex but consistent code whereby the major language of the immigrant home, first in Brooklyn's Brownsville and then on the Lower East Side, is Yiddish, portrayed by Roth as standard English (Kleederman 1974). The children on the street and among themselves speak in a New York dialect of English, sometimes with a few borrowed Yiddish words, transcribed in the text to reflect pronunciation. Adult immigrants, Jews and non-Jews, speak to people outside their group in an accented English that is influenced by their mother tongue. Added to these are Hebrew and Aramaic of the religious school, and Polish that David's mother uses to keep secrets from him.

At no point does this well tailored language system break down in David's mind; he controls all parts and knows their place. Language is present in the foreground as intense, mind-boggling events and emotions confuse and overwhelm David, as we follow his education in matters of sex, love, family relations, physical abuse and violence. Yet in this passionately psychological novel, language does not appear as a threat or puzzle for David, even though the different components seem to collide against each other. As the process of becoming American ensues, language represents hearth and home for the immigrant child.

This does not mean that the rest of the world adjusts to David's delicately balanced language system. Right off, we see that the young adult immigrants, David's parents, do not fare as well. When the immigrant couple is reunited upon the wife and child's arrival at Ellis Island, marital conflict and cultural disintegration are clearly presaged in the symbol of broken Yiddish, one of the few times that standard English is not used by Roth (1991: 16).

Not only is there disorder in David's family system, but the outside non-Jewish world does not accept his language strategies. In a frightening scene in which David gets lost on the city streets, this English-Yiddish bilingual cannot make the name of his street understood (Roth 1991: 97–100). The phonology followed by Jewish residents may be part of the system of appropriating the streets of New York as part of their Jewish world, but it is not always conducive for communicating with non-Jews. David seems destined to be a prisoner of the Jewish street, able to communicate only with those who speak Yiddish and Jewish English. The ambivalence toward Yiddish starts early. The children are enclosed by a protective web that shields them in their first years from the public language that is their key to mobility. As we see, in the case of little David on the streets of Brooklyn, it is terrifying to be fettered by the language of your youth.

Echoing the fiction of Roth, himself an immigrant child who came to the United States at age two and grew up on New York's Lower East Side, is the autobiographical essay by the literary critic Irving Howe (1946: 364), a child of immigrants who was raised in the East Bronx. On his first day in kindergarten, he identified the fork that the teacher held up by the Yiddish word *gupl*. Shamed by the laughter of the whole class, five-year old Irving informed his parents that afternoon that he would never again speak Yiddish to them. This silence of the second generation belies a knowledge of the language and culture, at the same time that it halts transmission to the next generation.

The children of immigrants, growing up in the neighborhoods of secondary settlement were not deprived of a Yiddish cultural milieu, as Howe attests (1982: 2–3), but they were often unaware of its dimensions. Although a far cry from the vibrancy of the Lower East Side, Howe's East Bronx of the 1920s and 1930s was dominated by spoken Yiddish. The English of the young, in addition, had a unique intonation, analogous to that described by Roth. Crotona Park, where Howe played ball, was a meeting place for Yiddish literati. Yiddish theater was performed at the McKinley Square Theater, a few blocks from his apartment, and a secular Yiddish school stood on another street. Yiddish did indeed spread throughout the New York neighborhoods, but the degree of involvement of descendants of the immigrants was far less than that of parents and grandparents.

The interplay of languages on city streets, as well as in public and private forums, is a telling indicator of continuity and discontinuity in communicative competencies among community members who speak Yiddish. The character of Yiddish language behavior in the city needs also to be scrutinized in those arenas where being a Yiddish reader, and not only a Yiddish speaker, figures prominently. A 1965 study of the Yiddish readership frequenting New York public libraries was imaginative, if somewhat unsystematic, in that ethnographic observations at a selected subsample of these sites complemented the author's audit of circulation figures for Yiddish books (Faust 1973: 283–285). Thus, a visit to Hamilton Fish Park Library on Manhattan's Lower East Side confirmed that those who enter the building to read Yiddish books or to choose from the available variety of Yiddish periodicals were mostly elderly individuals; librarians estimated that a total of 150 Yiddish volumes were checked out per month. Seward Park Library circulation statistics showed that in 1959, 1,769 books were circulated, and 1,906 books went out in 1962, but borrowers are known to come from other districts to examine some of the special and rare editions housed at that branch. Specific figures were compiled from libraries throughout neighborhoods in the Bronx and Brooklyn, while more extended fieldwork documented how the latter borough's Williamsburg branch serviced its residents.

Data on the distribution of Yiddish newspapers and Yiddish and Hebrew books throughout the United States in a nationwide study by N. Goldberg (1948) uncovered a drop overall in the figures for Yiddish dailies in the time period between 1918 and 1947, but the decline is sharper in the cities outside of New York. The comparative tabulations

disclose that New York City furnished approximately 70 per cent of the total number of newspaper subscribers, in some years as much as 84 per cent (Goldberg 1948: 42–56).

3. *The language of poetry, the poetry of place*

Not only speakers and readers, but also Yiddish writers developed a constant, continuing association with New York. American Yiddish poetry is an important locus for discovering how a sense of belonging is forged through the community's language practices. American Yiddish poets sing of their connection to the city of New York in a variety of voices, from the writings of the Introspectivists, a school of modernist Yiddish poets who emphasized experimentation in poetic form and language, largely inaccessible to the masses, to the unpretentious verses that were pronounced at political rallies or widely performed at social gatherings.[2]

The panorama of poetic creativity in Yiddish in New York includes the words of Mina Bordo-Rivkin, who in 1954 wrote in Far Rockaway, Queens of the budding romances that flowered during the pilgrimages of the young to the Atlantic Ocean (Mayzl 1955: 709–710). H. Royzenblat, too, was enchanted by the love between a young couple visiting the oceanside amusement park in Coney Island (Mayzl 1955: 238–240). Y. Slonim, who came to the United States at age two in 1885, wrote "On Vandover Avenue" in 1942 about his return to the Bronx of his youth, a journey that evoked special memories of the literary, socialist, and Zionist clubs that assembled in Crotona Park and Claremont Park (Mayzl 1955: 308–310). He was himself affiliated with the literary group, *Di yunge*, and remembers how he would play in the park as a boy with the writers-to-be, Dilon and Ignatov. It was later, in the park, that his own poetry would mature and he would fall in love with his future wife. The poem in which he describes these sentiments is laden with ambivalence, for he misses the optimistic excitement of unknown prospects and fails to convey this feeling to his sons, who accompany him on his nostalgic visit. The symbolism of the absence of intergenerational continuity is clear, as the sons look on with love, sensing their father's joy and sorrow, yet they remain closed off from the historic cultural experience of his younger years.

Several poets, especially among the Introspectivists, were taken with the image of the city and used the New York cityscape as an abstraction of the American metropolis (Harshav 1986: 43). The city is seen, symbolically, as a hub where dreams are built, more than as a locale for developing one's identity. In his book *In New York*, for example, M. L. Halpern uses the city image to express feelings of homelessness (Hellerstein 1982: xiv, xix). Leyeles, the Introspectivist who is best known for introducing into Yiddish poetry the highly structured forms of European poetry, uses "Wall Street" as a symbol of the uncaring gods of contemporary capitalist society (Leyeles 1926: 37; Cooperman – Cooperman 1967: 153–155). In other poems, he proclaims his love for places, streets, and edifices, such as the Manhattan Bridge, Madison Square Garden and Broadway, but he is unconvincing about his affinity for these urban sites and structures (Leyeles 1926: 38–39, 47–48, 54). More often, we find the city as the backdrop for a polemic on social inequity, such as in Ester Shumyatsher's "My New York Street Sings". The song that cries out from the joyous, noisy Manhattan streets is the wail of poverty, inciting the poet to declare that Manhattan will have to pay for this (Mayzl 1955: 777–778).

When the Yiddish immigrant poet feels at home in New York, it is largely because the city embraces an entire universe of languages and cultures:

> It's a city of merriment,
> A city of many nations,
> All tongues are here evident
> In noise or adoration...
>
> You're never astray,
> You're always at home...
> Nowhere here a stranger –
> Everywhere, free, free...
>
> (Lyesin, in Cooperman – Cooperman 1967: 37–38)

New York also represents freedom from anti-Semitism and its dangers:

> My home is now New York, the free city of nations,
> The city where church bells ring away unheard.
> And where no blood flows in the name of a god.
>
> (Halpern 1919 [1982]: 51)

Not only is the strong international, tolerant ambiance of the city attractive, but the Jewish presence is undeniably reassuring. To Hirshbeyn, the Hudson is more appealing than other rivers because of the million and a half Jews living in the city (Mayzl 1955: 265–266). Chatham Square in Lower Manhattan is the subject of several poems because Jews are buried there, refugees from Portugal in the seventeenth century who were pro-

vided with a haven (Gross, in Cooperman – Cooperman 1967: 344; Shvarts, in Rozhanski 1977: 71–74). The Lower East Side is home to piety, tradition, and continuity, i. e. *vu yidish nusekh yoyvlt* 'where Yiddish is celebrated', according to Opalov (Mayzl 1955: 622–623). As for the language, the essay "On East Broadway" states that Yiddish is stylish, no longer a mere "jargon" (Shapiro, in Mayzl 1955: 244–246).

One Yiddish poet, Leyvik, writes of sitting in Hester Park on the Lower East Side, yet envisioning his parents' graves in Russia (Harshav 1986: 730–731). The pull of his birthplace at that moment is stronger than "the towering city", yet he feels virtually enveloped by the compact and circumscribed Jewish tract that has been recreated on the Lower East Side (Harshav 1986: 695). Another writer, Vaynshteyn, poignantly laments the last lingering sounds of the Old World on this new territory:

> *Tsu hern zey redn vert dir epes troyerik-bang,*
> *Vos fun shtetldikn yid geblibn iz bloyz a klang.*
> [To hear them speak makes you sad and forlorn,
> That only a sound remains of the shtetl Jew.]
> (Mayzl 1955: 832–833, authors' translation)

Years later, the poet Arn Tseytlin will write his "New York Elegy", testifying that he himself and "the dying language of my verse...have been put out on the street like an old piece of furniture, a lost remnant of a world" (Mayzl 1955: 731–732, authors' translation). Tsetylin managed to reach the shores of New York at the beginning of World War II, yet lost his family in the Nazi onslaught. When Tseytlin stands by the Hudson, he thinks of the Jordan and the Vistula, of Jewish life in the land of Israel and in Poland (Cooperman – Cooperman 1967: 159). The literary critic Sh. Niger (1941: 24), who spent most of his career in New York, reflected that the immigrants looked for all developments of Yiddish culture to emanate from Eastern Europe. When that source was obliterated, the Yiddish poets of New York mourned their fate and became the guardians of Yiddish language and culture.

4. *Becoming American: language in transition*

The relationship of New York Jews to Jewish New York was also characterized by a collaborative team of Yiddish poets and writers who worked under the auspices of the New York City Unit of the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration. This Yiddish Writers' Group, in two Yiddish-language volumes describing Jewish hometown

associations and Jewish family clubs in New York City during the early years of this century, published results from a survey of approximately 2000 organizations, including findings on Yiddish-related language use, educational achievements, media habits, and leisure time preferences (Federal Writers' Project, 1938; 1939; Kliger 1992). In addition, the writers contributed flavorful chapters reporting on exchanges taking place in restaurants, meeting halls, and immigrant institutions in New York City. Against the backdrop of these urban settings, the Yiddish-language deliberations invariably center on the quest for community.

Yiddish-speaking Jews established their presence in New York and confirmed, to themselves and to other city dwellers, their intention to remain a vital component of the metropolis. In the internal communal networks they created by themselves and for themselves, their attempts to perpetuate language, culture, and identity were shaped by the encroachment of English-language influences. Indeed, in the very same immigrant clubs described in the WPA study, one author found signs of the infiltration of English at the gatherings he attended, where Yiddish was ostensibly the language of choice. As a result, he prepared a guide to conducting a meeting in correct Yiddish, offering proper Yiddish speech constructions for uniformly discussing the affairs of the organization at its assemblies (Itskovits 1944: 114–120).

Similar counsel was forthcoming from another observer, actually a listener, who classified Yiddish broadcasts on New York's radio station WEVD according to patterns of pronunciation and unsuitable borrowings from English or German. These inconsistencies and other "contaminations" (Gutmans 1958) were deemed inappropriate for a language heard on the airwaves by an estimated 175,000 listeners in the New York area, in other words, a public language.

Outside of the community's own organizations, Yiddish was evidently also ranked an official language by municipal authorities. Press releases with information deemed newsworthy for the general public were disseminated from offices in City Hall in numerous languages, including Yiddish. Appraising one such document, a mimeographed sheet from the Office of Civil Defense, M. Mark laments the multitude of errors, "at least one mistake on each of forty lines", and ponders whether other foreign languages are similarly mishandled and mixed with English (Mark 1952: 89–91).

Where questions arise about language maintenance and language shift, be it in the inner realm of family and communal life or in the domain of civic governance, the politics of identity can never be far behind. This

theme of the interrelation of language and ideology surfaced in a maneuver by Republicans in New York who, during the World War I years, suggested an amendment to the New York State constitution that would mandate literacy in English for all potential voters in New York elections. In his absorbing analysis of this campaign, Fishman (1993a) relates that the initial proposal was put forth at a time when the prerequisite for U. S. citizenship was knowing how to read *any* language, with Yiddish most definitely regarded as an admissible option. Clearly, a change in policy such as was submitted in 1915 would weaken the power at the polls of New York's Jews. Present in this constituency were the Yiddish-literate voters whose participation in elections could be counted on in greater proportions than other groups, and whose ticket tended to be Democratic and socialist-leaning.

Some New Yorkers responded to this contest, when it first arose, as if it were a conflict about the Jewish vote; the vitality of the Yiddish voice was defended by others, notably the renowned attorney and leader of the American Jewish Committee, Louis Marshall. The only Yiddish newspaper that supported the proposed change framed the issue not as a Jewish one, but as an immigration matter. The other dailies were vehemently opposed, and eventually the legislature canceled the motion. However, when the same amendment was recommended in 1921, voice and vote were entwined in a different kind of configuration. By this time, according to Fishman (1993b), bilingualism was more prevalent in the New York Jewish community. And, the rhetoric in the Yiddish press and on the streets was circumscribed to arguments about American ideals and principles of American democracy. This time the amendment was accepted, a portent of things to come in 1924 when the mass immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe that had brought hundreds of thousands of Yiddish speakers to New York City was halted. These dwindling numbers, together with the inevitable acclimatization of first- and second-generation Jews to American society, inextricably altered the commitment to Yiddish language and culture. Communication in Yiddish and about the continuity of Yiddish would carry on, but in ways that would reflect the new circumstances of its champions.

Succeeding generations in the Jewish community in New York were involved with the ethnic language, Yiddish, differentially. As with other immigrant-based communities, the changes in language behavior cannot be separated from changes in group identification (Nahirny and Fishman 1965). One place to scrutinize these dynamics is in the particular case of the New York secular Jewish afternoon schools, where the vicissitudes of

Yiddish language instruction verify a shifting balance between bilingualism and biculturalism not only in the classroom, but in the ethnic community at large (Kliger – Peltz 1990). These schools were sponsored by several organizations of differing political and cultural complexion. Jewish children, in the afternoon hours after attending public schools, studied such non-religious subjects as history, literature and Jewish folkways with Yiddish as the language of instruction.

The first wave to enter the Yiddish schools were immigrant children and children of immigrants who knew Yiddish from home. With the cessation of immigration, the schools soon served pupils who heard little or no Yiddish from their parents. In 1935, in New York City, there were 6,800 school children in attendance in the secular Jewish schools, representing 9.3% of all students in Jewish schools (Mark 1948). In 1951, enrollment in these schools constituted only 4% of the Jewish student population in New York City (Ruffman 1957). Nationwide studies in 1959 (Dushkin – Engelman) and in 1968 (Institute of Jewish Affairs 1971) substantiate this downward trend in enrollment and in the number of schools. Still, the efficacy of the program offered by the network of Yiddish schools was validated by the Greater New York study for 1951 (Ruffman 1957), certifying that students from Yiddish afternoon schools scored higher in examinations on Jewish history, Jewish holidays, and Hebrew than did students from synagogue-affiliated Hebrew afternoon schools. Interestingly, graduates of the Yiddish schools in New York City displayed the most positive opinions of all students about their Jewish education. At this time in history, most Jewish children receiving a Jewish education in New York City were attending supplementary schools after public school in the neighborhood Orthodox synagogues. The curriculum consisted largely of the liturgy of the prayer book and Bible stories. Only students from the Orthodox yeshiva day schools performed better than those from the Yiddish schools. The yeshivas were full day schools for pupils who did not attend public school. They were usually under the auspices of more strictly observant Orthodox authorities than the neighborhood synagogues. In 1960, 47 of these 87 religious day schools in New York City taught Yiddish (Poll 1981: 214–216).

Throughout their history, the Yiddish secular schools in New York were grappling with a fate they shared with all proponents of the Yiddish language. This destiny was irrevocably recast by American realities and events in Europe, starting with suspended immigration from Eastern Europe in 1924, the rise of Nazism in the 1930s, the annihilation of the Yiddish heartland and the majority of its speakers during World II, and

the establishment of the state of Israel. The schools also felt deeply the repercussions of economic, residential and social changes within the American Jewish community. The human, linguistic, and cultural resources required to bolster the cause of Yiddish language instruction had become greatly diminished.

Unfortunately, appropriate teaching materials for the new era in the development of the secular schools were not produced (Parker 1981). The Jewish Teachers' Seminary and Peoples' University in New York City prepared several generations of Yiddish educators (Shteynboym 1978–1979), but this training institute closed in 1977. Residential patterns shifted drastically in the neighborhoods that sustained these schools. By the last quarter of the twentieth century, it became obvious to its patrons that the secular Yiddish school system was unable to supplement and authenticate its language maintenance efforts with viable forms of support rooted in the immediate environment of the children and their families, the neighborhoods of the city.

5. *Daily lives, daily languages: Yiddish on the streets of New York*

To probe further the relationship between the course of Yiddish linguistic and cultural continuity and the connectedness of community members to their urban surroundings, it is useful to review features of language that have been inspected in situ, as it were, on the sidewalks of New York. The sparseness of the data deserves an explanation. How is it that such a large urban Jewish population has not been examined to gain insight into face-to-face communication patterns in its ethnic mother tongue? The politics of scholarship on spoken Yiddish reflects a strong bent towards normativism and the absence of ethnographic observation of actual language behavior in Yiddish (Peltz 1990). Moreover, linguistic analysis of Yiddish in its East European setting has been favored because the spoken language in its new American environment was viewed to be in a state of disintegration (Weinreich 1941: 34).

This does not mean that New York City Yiddish speakers have not been the subject of investigation. In a study that attempted to evaluate the complex dialectical situation in New York City, Disenhouse (1974) chose informants from four major religious subgroups – Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Hasidic Jews – to determine whether the manner of pronouncing certain phonological variables in English, including

in loan words from Yiddish, signifies beliefs about ethnic identification. Jofen (1964) and the *Language and Culture Atlas of Ashkenazic Jewry* (Herzog et al. 1969; Herzog 1992) examined the speech of city residents, but the research design was limited to dialectological aspects of their language, with Eastern Europe as the basis. Yiddish cultural activists, when tested for word naming and usage and compared with Puerto Rican Spanish speakers, were shown to be stronger in Yiddish in cultural and ethnic behavior domains, whereas English was more prevalent in home and work domains (Ronch et al. 1969). Labov (1966 [1982]: 121, 132) in his well-known study of English speech on the Lower East Side had to qualify the inclusion into the category of native English speakers two women who immigrated at age five, supposedly because of the Yiddish influence in their speech. The characterization of the special linguistic qualities of Jewish speakers of English has described the influence of Yiddish on such English speech (Gold 1985).

When we survey Yiddish language behavior observed in the city's neighborhoods, we come across Weinreich's (1941: 34) observation of remarks overheard in a Lower East Side shop: the word for word loan translation *mit a shlos un mit on a shlos* 'with a lock and without a lock' (Yiddish "without" is simply "*on*"). In Brooklyn's Brownsville neighborhood, a largely working class enclave of secondary settlement that was 80% Jewish in the first decades of the twentieth century, a young Italian friend of the American-born Jewish boys could speak Yiddish and was called by the Yiddish name "*Shimmele*" instead of Jimmy (Sorin 1990: 16).

It is among the Hasidim of New York that researchers have most fruitfully been able to study the predicament of English and Yiddish bilingualism. In the only study to concentrate on children born in America, Jochnowitz (1968) found that children of the Lubavitch Hasidim, a large sect centered in Crown Heights that actively seeks proselytes among secular Jews, retained much of the dialectal features of their parents and were not influenced greatly by the standard Yiddish of the radio or other dialects present in Crown Heights, nor did he find a strong influence of Yiddish on the observed phonology of English. Girls spoke English more readily because in the primary grades they have secular instruction in English in the afternoon, whereas the boys' entire school-day is in Yiddish.

Most of the findings relate to Hasidic residents of Brooklyn neighborhoods that maintain Yiddish. The growth of these ultra-Orthodox communities reverses the older trend in a neighborhood like Boro Park,

where by 1918 English had replaced Yiddish in most synagogues as the language of sermons and announcements (Mayer 1979: 27). As late as 1973, a local Hasidic rabbi with poor command of English was forced to turn to the language nonetheless, in order to satisfy his second and third generation modern Orthodox congregation who had meager knowledge of Yiddish (Mayer 1979: 110). Although Boro Park had become a major Hasidic neighborhood by the 1960s, its diverse Jewish complexion included non-observant residents. Today, some Hasidim are attracted to the more traditional and insular atmosphere of Williamburg:

> Over here the kids would speak mainly Yiddish – not mainly but *only* Yiddish; over there you hear kids speaking English. In other words the barriers between Jews and secular people are much greater over here than over there ... I want to raise my kids in the values here in Williamsburg rather than those in Borough Park (Mintz 1992: 111)

Yiddish figures prominently in the cultural agenda of the Brooklyn Hasidic neighborhoods. In 1960–1961, Brooklyn contained more than half of the Jewish day schools in the United States that taught in Yiddish. Of the 47 day schools teaching Yiddish then in the city, 35 were in Brooklyn (Poll 1981: 214–216). One mother in Boro Park was reportedly concerned about her children's knowledge of English, feeling that the educational program of total immersion in Yiddish and Hebrew in the early school years was too drastic (Mintz 1992: 178).

In the 1970s, the same Brooklyn neighborhoods also witnessed conflicts that involved the very Yiddish cultural institutions that served them. Satmar Hasidim, a sect deriving from Hungary who maintain strict separation from the secular world and oppose the official state and government of Israel, were accused of ransacking and burning to the ground the offices of *Der algemeyner zhurnal* in Boro Park, a Yiddish weekly that supports Lubavitch. Harassing phone calls were made to subscribers, distributors and advertisers in Williamsburg and a local candy store that carried the paper was destroyed by fire (Mintz 1992: 57). In 1989, Yiddish made news again. A coalition of Puerto Rican, other Latino, and Black residents in Brooklyn filed complaints against the developer of the new Brooklyn Villas condominium apartments for failing to dispense information outside the Hasidic community. The only major advertising had been in the Yiddish weekly *Di tsaytung* and information packets were printed only in Yiddish (Mintz 1992: 262–264).

The most recently arrived cohort of Yiddish speakers to have populated Brooklyn, mainly, and other neighborhoods are the Soviet Jewish immigrants who, according to Markowitz (1993: 155), "seek work and residential situations where they can use Yiddish in everyday life. Many ...boast that their fluency in Yiddish enabled them to... find apartments and first jobs in New York." She cites a study by the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York (1985: 11) that concluded that 68 percent of the Soviet Jewish immigrant interviewees understand Yiddish, and 43 percent speak the language. In New York, continues Markowitz, this Jewish language becomes the *lingua franca* of many Soviet immigrants, allowing them to communicate in public arenas with Americans. This dramatic transition in the status of Yiddish for this group, from a secret Jewish code to a public language with its own press and radio stations, attests to and verifies the change that the immigrants' Jewish identity undergoes as a result of migration. Elevation of Yiddish to one of the several languages used in public by New York's varied ethnic and immigrant groups legitimizes its speakers as well.

6. *Language and the culture of community: communication in context*

In this essay, we have viewed the acquisition of certain Yiddish linguistic practices as a dynamic ongoing process. And, we have found it rewarding to consider the connections between language and locality. "Speakers develop linguistic patterns as they act in their various communities," according to Eckert – McConnell-Ginet, such that "in practice, social meaning, social identity, community membership, and the symbolic value of linguistic form are constantly and mutually constructed" (Eckert – McConnell-Ginet 1992: 473). In our pursuit of what these authors call "living social practices in local communities," (Eckert – McConnell-Ginet 1992: 462) in this study of Yiddish in New York City, we have undoubtedly posed new dilemmas. We point to complexities that still need to be unraveled: the similarities and disparities in ethnocultural behavior of the first and second generations, the contrasts in the cultural landscape of neighborhoods of primary, secondary and subsequent settlement, the effects of short-lived residence in an area on personal and group identification with a neighborhood or with the city as a whole. Hopefully, the less traditional route we have taken has offered some discoveries, too, and new pathways for examining the embeddedness of Yiddish language and culture in the lives of Jews in New York City.

There are, it should be clear by now, many ways to learn about the linguistic differences that exist among New York's Yiddish speakers and

readers. The rich texture of city life, as experienced and expressed by members of the ethnolinguistic minority, can be captured via a variety of methodologies. We have tried to bring forward an assortment of data as evidence for how the key to community is in the patterns of communication that the ethnic group develops. For the immigrants in New York City, and for their children, the ties were strengthened by Yiddish.

Notes

1. Both authors contributed equally to the research and writing of this article; their names appear in alphabetical order.
2. All poetry quoted in this section was written and published in Yiddish. We present English translations of these texts.

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