



Towards a New Understanding of Jewish Language in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract

This article outlines some debates and issues in the field of Jewish linguistics and offers a research agenda for comparative analysis of Jewish languages. This agenda builds on previous research, especially on Yiddish and Judezmo (Judeo-Spanish), but also incorporates data on the language of contemporary Jews (especially Jewish English), as well as theories and methods from variationist sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. Based on a new understanding of Jewish language as a distinctively Jewish repertoire rather than a separate system, this research agenda aims to provide a more nuanced and unified understanding of the phenomenon of Jewish language.

Introduction

Throughout history Jews have tended to speak and write distinctly from their non-Jewish neighbors. The differences have ranged from the addition of a few Hebrew words to a completely divergent system of grammar and lexicon. The resulting language varieties have been analyzed within the field of Jewish linguistic studies. There has been a great deal of research on Jewish languages that began in ancient or medieval times, especially Yiddish, Judezmo (also known as Judeo-Spanish or Ladino), and Judeo-Arabic. Recently, we have begun to see research on how contemporary Diaspora Jews speak their local languages, especially Jewish varieties of English (Steinmetz 1981; Gold 1985, 1986; Weiser 1995; Benor 1998, 2000, 2004a,b, in press b; Fader 2000, 2007; Bernstein 2006, 2007) and Russian (Estraikh 2007; Verschik 2007). This article outlines some of the debates in the field of Jewish linguistic studies and argues for a more comprehensive model of Jewish language.

Scholarship

While ancient and medieval rabbinic scholars were interested in linguistic issues surrounding Hebrew holy texts, research on the phenomenon of Diaspora Jewish languages began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries (see surveys in Wexler 1981, especially p. 100, and Sunshine 1995). Influenced partly by political interests, amateur and trained scholars began to study Yiddish in comparison to languages used by Jews elsewhere in the world. For example, at a watershed conference in 1908, Yiddishist Matisyohu Mises and Hebraist Nakhum Sokolov debated the similarities among Yiddish, Judezmo, and Judeo-Arabic (Weinreich 1931 [1908]; Goldsmith 1987; Sunshine 1995; see also Mises 1915).

Throughout the twentieth century, scholars published studies of individual Jewish languages, such as Judeo-Italian and Judeo-Arabic (e.g., Blondheim 1925; Cassuto 1932; Blanc 1964; Blau 1965). Comparative research on the phenomenon of Jewish languages was spearheaded by two Yiddishists, Solomon Birnbaum (1937, 1971, 1979) and Max Weinreich (1953, 1956, 1980 [1973]). The late 1970s and 1980s saw a slew of edited volumes that dealt with several Jewish languages (Paper 1978; Rabin et al. 1979; Fishman 1981a, 1985a, 1987; Gold 1989), a short-lived journal (Gold & Prager 1981–1987), and progress toward a unified theoretical understanding of Jewish language based on comparative analysis (Bunis 1981; Gold 1981a,b; Fishman 1981b, 1985b; Rabin 1981; Wexler 1981). It was in these years that the study of Jewish languages transitioned from the realm of isolated publications to a small academic field. Several scholars offered suggestions for what this field should be called, including Jewish interlinguistics, Jewish intralinguistics, and linguistics of Jewish languages (see Bunis 1981; Gold 1981a; Rabin 1981; Wexler 1981; Fishman 1985b; Alvarez-Péreyre & Baumgarten 2003). I use the term ‘comparative Jewish linguistics’, as it is transparent and emphasizes the comparative nature of the enterprise.

In the past decade, there has been a wave of renewed interest in comparative Jewish linguistics, as evidenced by a number of conferences in Israel, Europe, and the USA, new publications (Morag et al. 1999; Lowenstein 2000; Alvarez-Péreyre & Baumgarten 2003; Myhill 2004; Hary 2004; Spolsky & Benor 2006; Wexler 2006), and the use of new media to disseminate information and encourage collaboration and comparative research (Jewish Language Research Website – <http://www.jewish-languages.org/>; Jewish Languages Mailing List – <http://www.jewish-languages.org/ml>).

In all of this scholarship on Jewish languages, as in language research more generally, there have been two major trends: descriptive and theoretical. The descriptive work has provided data on the written and spoken language of Jews around the world and throughout history. For languages no longer spoken, this research has centered on analysis of ancient inscriptions and medieval texts, many of which were found in the Cairo Genizah. For endangered and thriving languages, researchers have used ethnographic methodologies with living informants, in addition to textual analysis. In the current era, the latter type of descriptive research has become crucially time-sensitive, as many of the Jewish vernaculars that began in ancient and medieval times are on the verge of assimilation to other languages. After the historical upheavals and mass migrations of the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries, Jews from Europe, Asia, and Africa are integrating into Israeli, American, and other societies, favoring varieties of the new local languages over their ancestral vernaculars (see, for example, Harris 1994; Lowenstein 2000). An example of this type of 'salvage linguistics' (Gold 1981a, pp. 39–40) is the *Language and Culture Atlas of Ashkenazic Jewry* (Herzog et al. 1992), which was compiled based on interviews with mostly elderly Yiddish speakers throughout Eastern and Central Europe, including elicitations of specific linguistic and cultural forms. Much of the descriptive work on Jewish languages (as well as liturgical Hebrew recitation traditions) can be found in two Hebrew language publications, the journal *Massorot: Studies in Language Traditions and Jewish Languages* and the monograph series *Eda Velashon: Language and Tradition*, published by two research institutes at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem – the Center for the Study of Jewish Languages and Literatures and the Jewish Oral Traditions Research Center.

Alongside this important descriptive work has been a tradition of comparison: looking for similarities and differences in the speech and writing of Jews throughout history and around the world. Seventy years ago, Solomon Birnbaum called for 'a new field of linguistics, a Jewish sociology of language based on comparison of all Jewish languages' (1937, p. 195). Max Weinreich suggested a 'systematic research program' on language use in various Jewish communities (1980, p. 54), and David Gold proposed Jewish intralinguistics as a field of study (1981a). There have been a number of moves in that direction (e.g., Weinreich 1980; Bunis 1981; Gold 1981a; Gold & Prager 1981–1987; Wexler 1981, 2006; Varol & Szulmajster 1994; Alvarez-Péreyre & Baumgarten 2003), but there is still much work to be done. In the remainder of this article, I discuss some of the issues and debates that have been central to this comparative research tradition, and I offer my own take on them.

Like Max Weinreich's research, the viewpoints presented here are influenced by recent findings and theories in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. For example, I highlight the inevitability of inter-speaker variation according to various social dimensions, as well as intra-speaker variation according to audience, topic, and setting. And I emphasize the importance of ideology and personal choice in individuals' linguistic performance.

Traditionally, Jewish linguistic research (e.g., Paper 1978; Weinreich 1980; Alvarez-Péreyre & Baumgarten 2003; Myhill 2004) has not included the speech of contemporary Jews. However, a number of recent works have bucked this trend (e.g., Gold 1981a, 1985, 1986; Rabin 1981; Steinmetz 1981; Fishman 1985b; Prager 1986; Weiser 1995; Benor 1998, in press b; Spolsky & Benor 2006). Following this new wave of research, I use data on contemporary Jewish languages (mostly Jewish American English) to help us understand Jewish languages of the past. Only in contemporary languages can researchers gather both written and spoken data from all members of a community, not just those who left written records or

whose speech was commented on by others. Researchers of contemporary language have access to detailed sociological information, and they can test their hypotheses through interviews with speakers and experimental methods. Comparative Jewish linguistics can then determine if the findings on contemporary language also apply to Jewish languages of the past. As Gold pointed out, 'Features in one JL alert the researcher to their possible occurrence in others' (Gold 1981a, p. 38, see also Gold 1989, p. 79). Max Weinreich (1980) made a similar point, saying that linguistic research on Yiddish gives us a sense of which questions to pose about other Jewish languages.

Comparative Jewish Linguistics: Issues and Debates

The theoretical side of Jewish linguistics has centered around a number of questions (see Baumgarten 2003 and Alvarez-Péreyre 2003 for surveys). What constitutes a Jewish language? How can the many Jewish languages be divided up? What do Jewish languages have in common? How do Jewish languages arise? What names should be used to refer to Jewish languages? In the remainder of this article, I discuss the first two of these important issues.

WHAT CONSTITUTES A JEWISH LANGUAGE?

From the earliest comparative Jewish linguistic studies, there has been debate about what should be considered a 'Jewish language'. Several scholars have offered definitions, attempting not only to describe a phenomenon but also to limit what would be included in comparative Jewish linguistics. This work has pointed to a number of problems inherent in any attempt to define 'Jewish language'. This section discusses these problems and the solutions that have been proposed, and then it offers a new solution that deals with all of the problems simultaneously.

Problem 1: Criteria for Membership in the Category 'Jewish Languages' May Not Be Universal

Some definitions stipulate that 'Jewish languages' must be written with Hebrew/Jewish letters, must have arisen out of a text translation scenario, or must be spoken only by Jews. As Fishman argues, these definitions 'are intellectually impoverishing at the very least since they obscure more variance than they explain. Above all, they force premature conclusions upon the sociology of Jewish languages' (1985b, p. 7). In addition, the focus on writing ignores the most important function of language – face-to-face communication – and betrays the bias toward historical Jewish languages rather than incipient ones.

To deal with this problem, a number of scholars have proposed broader definitions of 'Jewish language'. Gold argues that a language variety is Jewish

‘to the extent it furnishes its Jewish users with the means of expressing all that a person as a Jew needs to express by language’ (Gold 1981a, p. 33; see also Gold 1985, p. 280). Rabin (1981) considers a Jewish language to be one used in diglossia with Hebrew (and Aramaic) and, optionally, one that incorporates influence from those languages and is written in Hebrew letters. Fishman’s definition is the most detailed:

I define as ‘Jewish’ any language that is phonologically, morpho-syntactically, lexico-semantically or orthographically different from that of non-Jewish sociocultural networks and that has some demonstrably unique function in the role-repertoire of a Jewish sociocultural network, which function is not normatively present in the role-repertoire of non-Jews and/or is not normatively discharged via varieties identical with those utilized by non-Jews. (Fishman 1985b, p. 4)

These definitions are less constraining and do allow contemporary speech and writing to be included in the field. But they do not account for the problems discussed below.

Problem 2: It Is Difficult to Distinguish Between a Language and a Dialect

Which Jewish communities speak separate Jewish languages, and which merely speak dialects of local languages? This question is central to the field, and its answer could change the scope of research significantly. With some exceptions (e.g., Gold 1981a,b; Fishman 1985b; Prager 1986; Benor in press b), researchers have tended to make judgments about whether a given way of speaking is a separate ‘Jewish language’. For example, Mises (1931 [1908]), arguing for the uniqueness of Yiddish, posits that Judezmo and Judeo-Arabic are not distinct enough from Spanish and Arabic to be considered separate languages (a stance that subsequent work has countered). Weinreich says that because Yavanic (Judeo-Greek) has systematized deviations from Greek, ‘it is necessary to speak of a separate language of Jews, however similar to Greek’ (1980, p. 62). And, Baumgarten (2003, p. 26) discusses the transition of any Jewish community’s speech from dialect to language. What criteria should be used to distinguish between a Jewish language and a Jewish dialect of a non-Jewish language?

It is well known in linguistics that the designation of a given language variety as language or dialect is bound up with socio-political forces. Gumperz gives a few examples:

Hindi and Urdu in India, Serbian and Croatian in Yugoslavia, Fanti and Twi in West Africa, Bokmal and Nynorsk in Norway, Kechwa and Aimara in Peru, to name just a few, are recognized as discrete languages both popularly and in law, yet they are almost identical at the level of grammar. On the other hand, the literary and colloquial forms of Arabic used in Iraq, Morocco, and Egypt, or the Welsh of North and South Wales, the local dialects of Rajasthan and Bihar in North India are grammatically quite separate, yet only one language is recognized in each case. (Gumperz 1982, p. 20)

Linguistic criteria cannot be used to distinguish between language and dialect, and judgments of mutual intelligibility are relative and connected to social factors (see Hary submitted). Even socio-political criteria like political autonomy (or the proverbial presence of an army and a navy) do not accurately predict whether two varieties are considered dialects or separate languages. Previous work on Jewish languages has recognized this problem and offered two solutions: noting that the term ‘Jewish language’ refers to both languages and dialects (Fishman 1985b; Bar-Asher 2002) or replacing the terms ‘Jewish language’ and ‘Jewish dialect’ with umbrella terms like ‘Jewish language variety’, ‘Jewish religiolect’ (Hary submitted), or ‘Jewish lect’ (Gold 1981a; Gold & Prager 1981–1987). ‘In order to see the objects of our inquiry ranged in a continuum, we choose to speak of *lects*, which we do not arrange in any rank of preference. . . . We collect data as we find it in any Jewish lect, even those whose distinguishing marks appear to be few’ (Prager 1986, p. 225).

Problem 3: Any Attempt to Define a Jewish Language Ignores Inter- and Intra-Speaker Variation

Modern sociolinguistics (e.g., Labov 1972) has demonstrated that variation is central to language use. Within a given speech community, different people speak differently, correlating with differences in region, socioeconomic status, gender, age, etc. In addition, individuals speak differently in different situations; this is especially the case in multilingual speech communities, which have been the norm for much of Jewish history. The definitions above imply that any given Jewish community has ‘*a* language’ (or ‘*a* lect’) that differs from ‘*the* language’ spoken by their non-Jewish neighbors and that all Jews in that community speak that language.

Gold’s proposed solution to this problem is to use more modifiers to identify subsets of a given ‘Jewish lect’, such as contemporary ‘Eastern Ashkenazic Orthodox American English’. One might extend this use of modifiers to account for intra-speaker variation, yielding a long descriptor like ‘Medieval North African Judeo-Arabic used for in-group communication about Jewish topics’. This solution allows us to account for Jews who speak or write in both a Jewish language and a non-Jewish language (e.g., Maimonides).

Problem 4: Some Non-Jews Use Jewish Language

An issue with calling a language ‘Jewish’ is that it might not be used exclusively by Jews (Hary & Wein 2005; Hary submitted). There might be Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Pagans, etc., who have close social or economic ties with Jews and get to know their languages. That was certainly the case in early modern Thessaloniki, where Greek was the main mode of communication but – because of the high concentration of Jews in

commerce – Judezmo was a major language of trade. The same is true for Yiddish spoken in Eastern Europe. Christians who lived and worked in close proximity with Jews in densely Jewish areas sometimes picked up Yiddish as a second language. If Judezmo and Yiddish are spoken by Christians or Muslims, should they no longer be seen as Jewish languages? Similarly, a number of words from the Hebrew component of Jewish languages have become widely used outside of Jewish communities. For example, Dutch speakers of all religions refer to Amsterdam as ‘Mokem’ from the Hebrew/(Western) Yiddish word for ‘place’, and American non-Jews use many Yiddish words (e.g., *klutz*, *shmooze*, and *shpiel*). Hary & Wein (2005) have proposed replacing the term ‘Jewish language’ with ‘Jewish-defined language’ to allow for non-Jews’ use of language that was once considered distinctly Jewish.

My Solution to All Four Problems: A New Theoretical Construct – The Distinctively Jewish Linguistic Repertoire

Rather than seeing a given Jewish community’s language as a ‘Jewish language’, I propose to see it as the selective use of a distinctively Jewish linguistic repertoire. I define distinctively Jewish linguistic repertoire as the linguistic features Jews have access to that distinguish their speech or writing from that of local non-Jews. This repertoire could be limited to the addition of a few words from Hebrew or another language, or it could be as extensive as a mostly distinct grammar and lexicon. Jews in any given time and place make selective use of their distinctive repertoire, in combination with the repertoires used by non-Jews, as they construct their identity.

This notion allows us to stop seeing the speech and writing used in any given Jewish community as a bounded system, renders the controversy about language vs. dialect irrelevant, and allows the use of more or less distinct language by any Jew or non-Jew. This approach changes the unit of analysis from a language or dialect to a community (see Hymes 1972, p. 36). It also changes the central question of Jewish linguistics from ‘Does [a given Jewish community] speak a Jewish language?’ to ‘To what extent does a given excerpt of speech or writing by a Jew make use of a distinctively Jewish linguistic repertoire?’ Rather than asking ‘What constitutes a Jewish language?’ we should ask, ‘What is the object of study of comparative Jewish linguistics?’ (see similar suggestion in Gold 1981a, p. 34). My answer to this is any ‘speech and writing of Jews (and related groups)’ (Gold 1981a, p. 31), including, as Gold suggests, peripheral groups, such as Karaites, Jewish Christians, Black Hebrews, and Subotniki.

This new approach to Jewish language is in line with the recent constructivist trend in the analysis of language and social identity (e.g., Le Page & Tabouret-Keller 1985; Eckert 2000; Coupland 2001, 2007; Irvine 2001; Bucholtz & Hall 2003; Davies 2006; Fought 2006): people have access

to an array of stylistic resources, and they deploy various combinations of these resources as they present themselves to others. Language (along with other socio-cultural practices) enables people to perform and perceive broad social dimensions like ethnicity, social class, age, gender, etc., as well as membership in more localized social networks and communities of practice. Through individuals' selective deployment of the stylistic resources available to them, mediated by ideologies about language and social categories, they are able to align themselves with some people and distinguish themselves from others.

Similarly, individual Jews have access to an array of stylistic resources, including a distinctively Jewish repertoire, and they deploy various combinations of these stylistic resources as they position themselves in relation to other Jews and non-Jews. When speaking to a Christian neighbor, for example, they might use only those distinctively Jewish features that they are not aware of. They might use more salient features when speaking to some Jews, even more when speaking to Jews who are versed in rabbinic texts, and even more when speaking about rabbinic texts. Through their selective use of this stylistic repertoire (in combination with dress, actions, etc.), they can present themselves not only as Jews but also as certain types of Jews.

By no means does this understanding of Jewish language render the last century of research erroneous or irrelevant. Rather, it enables a more realistic representation of the data and facilitates comparison across Jewish communities around the world and throughout history. If we consider glottonyms like 'Judeo-Greek,' 'Judeo-French,' and 'Jewish Argentine Spanish' to refer to stylistic repertoires rather than to bounded linguistic systems, then we can more accurately compare the speech of various groups of Jews. Similarly, in an effort to connect past and future work on the subject, we can still refer to these stylistic repertoires as 'Jewish languages', as long as we recognize that the term is an abstraction.

One issue with this approach is the difficulty in determining a basis for distinctiveness. Which local non-Jews should Jews be compared to linguistically? In a case where Jews live in close proximity to Muslims and Christians or to Hindus and Muslims (such as in Baghdad, Iraq, or Kerala, India), which group's language should serve as the basis for comparison? I would suggest selecting the group closest to Jews in area of residence, cultural preferences, and social, economic, and political status. The linguistic differences between Jews and this type of group are less likely attributable to differences in social class, etc., than the differences between Jews and a more distant group. And, therefore, this type of comparison is most relevant for comparative Jewish linguistic studies. In the case of historical Jewish languages, however, there might not be sufficient socio-historical research to determine which group should serve as a model for comparison, and there might not be sufficient linguistic description of non-Jewish language to analyze linguistic distinctiveness. In fact, in some cases, Jewish documents remain as the sole evidence of language used in

a given time and place. Despite these limitations, the repertoire approach allows researchers to focus on how Jews have used language to distinguish themselves from those they come into contact with.

The model proposed here is in line with Gold's understanding of Jewish languages that have been co-territorial (used in the same territory) with their non-Jewish correlates. He says that analyzing the extent of difference between the language of Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors 'allows us to avoid the *Scheinproblem* of having to consider [lects] as self-contained varieties, which must then be set against each other as two fully independent systems' (Gold 1981b, p. 41). However, elsewhere – in a work that was published in the same year – he offers a contradictory view, arguing that Jewish lects should be seen as discrete systems with dynamics separate from their co-territorial non-Jewish correlates, 'Because JLS are seen as systems, noting only what seem to be "curiosities" from the standpoint of the non-Jewish correlate is not enough' (Gold 1981a, p. 38).

I believe that this contradiction in Gold's work stems from his use of three very different languages as models for Jewish language: Jewish English, on the one hand, and Yiddish and Judezmo, on the other hand. Because Yiddish and Judezmo were maintained for centuries away from their lands of origin and from their non-Jewish language correlates, they belong to a distinct category of Jewish languages, which I refer to as 'post-co-territorial languages'. This type occurs only when a Jewish community maintains a language for many generations after migrating to a new language territory or continues to speak a language after local non-Jews have shifted to a different language. Other examples besides Yiddish and Judezmo include Judeo-Greek when local non-Jews had shifted to Latin and Judeo-Tadjik when Jews' closest non-Jewish neighbors spoke Uzbek (see Lowenstein 2000). While there may be other examples of post-co-territorial languages, they are certainly the exception rather than the norm in Jewish history; most Jewish communities have spoken a variant of the local language. Therefore, Gold's use of Jewish English as a model for Jewish linguistic distinctiveness may be more appropriate than modern Yiddish and Judezmo. At the same time, Yiddish and Judezmo are such rich sources of data that they should retain the central role they have played in Jewish linguistic studies. And we can still analyze them in relation to their original co-territorial non-Jewish languages, as long as we recognize that the developments that occurred after long-term territorial separation from their correlates are to a large extent anomalous in Jewish linguistic history.

HOW CAN THE MANY JEWISH LANGUAGES BE DIVIDED UP?

Wexler (1981, pp. 105–7) suggests a classification of Jewish languages into four types:

- (A) languages ‘linked through a chain of language shift back to spoken Palestinian Hebrew’ (e.g., Yiddish);
- (B) languages that have no Jewish substratum but ‘subsequently acquire a Jewish identity’ when Jews or non-Jews shift dialects or when Jews move to a new language area (e.g., Baghdadi Judeo-Arabic);
- (C) calque (word-for-word) translation languages (e.g., Ladino, the technical term for the translation variety of Judeo-Spanish); and
- (D) ‘situations where Jews in all regions speak the same language as the coterritorial non-Jews, but introduce occasional Hebrew-Aramaic or Jewish elements’ (e.g., Jewish English).

This classification is useful for our thinking about how Jewish languages arise and how they differ from each other, but the actual data are much messier; some languages may even fit into all four categories. Take Judeo-Arabic, for instance, which Wexler gives as an illustration of (B). He argues that all Baghdadis originally used the same dialect of Arabic but that Muslims switched to a Bedouin dialect and Jews did not (Wexler 1981, p. 106). I would argue that, in addition to (B), Judeo-Arabic is historically linked to Palestinian Hebrew through a chain of migration and language shift (A); it has a calque translation tradition called the *Sharh* (C) (Hary 2000); and in various periods (e.g., the time of Maimonides and the twentieth century), many Jews have been able to speak and write flawless Muslim Arabic (D).

Another attempt to classify Jewish languages (or ‘lects’) is Gold (1981a) and Prager’s notion that the speech and writing of any given Jewish community at any given time exists somewhere on a continuum of distinctiveness from its original non-Jewish correlate:

At one end of the continuum we can locate Jewish lects which are minimally different from their non-Jewish correlates (e.g. native Ashkenazic Buenos Aires Spanish); somewhat beyond the center we can find Jewish lects which are substantially different from their non-Jewish correlates (e.g. Yiddish and Judezmo); at the other end of the continuum we can identify a Jewish lect which is today radically different from its (ancient) non-Jewish correlate (namely contemporary Israeli Hebrew). (Prager 1986, p. 225)

Similarly, Masson (2003) suggests comparing Jewish languages on a scale of what he calls ‘Hebreotropism’ (French ‘Hébréotropisme’), or how much a language is influenced by Hebrew. Like Prager, he argues that contemporary Jewish French and Jewish English are much less influenced by Hebrew than Yiddish and that Israeli Hebrew is an extreme form of Hebreotropism.

The linguistic traits that Wexler, Gold, Prager, and Masson reference in their proposed categories are important, but they are only a few of the many dimensions that a comprehensive classification should take into account. In the tradition of sociolinguistics (e.g., Hymes 1972; Labov 1972; Preston 1986), I offer lists of social and linguistic traits that must be considered in a comprehensive program of comparative Jewish linguistics. For any given Jewish community – defined as a group of Jews living in the

same territory in a given period¹ – we might ask the following questions about their language use. Linguistic ‘features’ here refers to words and grammatical structures (including phonology/pronunciation, syntax/word order, semantics/meaning, pragmatics, discourse, and prosody). Note that some of the questions (especially 3 and 4) are not relevant to all Jewish communities.

Linguistic Variables

1. Textual Hebrew/Aramaic influence. To what extent does the linguistic repertoire include influence from and references to biblical and rabbinic texts of law, lore, and liturgy (Weinreich 1980; Bar-Asher 2002)?
2. Substratal influence. To what extent does the linguistic repertoire include features from ancestral languages spoken before migration or language shift (Weinreich 1980; Bunis 1981)?
3. Israeli Hebrew influence. In the era of political Zionism and the State of Israel, to what extent does the linguistic repertoire include features from Modern Hebrew² (Benor 1998, 2000, 2004a, in press b)?
4. Adstratal influence. To what extent does the linguistic repertoire include features from other languages, including new co-territorial language(s) in the case of post-co-territorial Jewish languages (Weinreich 1980)?
5. Displaced dialectalism. To what extent does the linguistic repertoire include features from other regions within the same language territory (e.g., Moroccan Arabic declensions used by Jews in Egypt, Central Italian vowels used by Judeo-Italian speakers in other regions) (Hary 2004, submitted)?
6. *L'havdil* factor. To what extent do Jews avoid local non-Jewish features seen as religious (e.g., Yiddish *bentshn* replaces *segenen* because of the latter's Christian connotations) (Weinreich 1980)?
7. Secret language. To what extent do Jews have secretive/humorous/derisive ways of talking about non-Jews, especially using Hebrew words (Benor in press a; Gindin 2002; Jacobs 2005, pp. 279–84)? To what extent are secretive ways of speaking crystallized into professional jargons (Jacobs 2005, pp. 279–84)?
8. Archaisms. To what extent do Jews maintain linguistic features when local non-Jews have shifted away from their use (Bar-Asher 2002)?
9. Orthography. To what extent do Jews write their language in Hebrew characters (as opposed to the orthography used by local non-Jews) (Birnbaum 1979)?
10. Textual translation. How widespread is the tradition of translating sacred texts into the vernacular? To what extent do these translations include word-for-word rendering of Hebrew/Aramaic sentence structure (Hary 2000, 2004; Bar-Asher 2002)?
11. Other distinctive features. To what extent does the linguistic repertoire include distinctively Jewish features other than the ones above?

Note that this will vary tremendously from community to community, and all levels of language (including phonology, syntax, pragmatics, discourse, and intonation) must be considered (see Benor in press b on other distinctive features of Jewish American English).

Once we analyze these 11 categories of linguistic distinctiveness, we can then ask three general questions.

1. Overall distinctiveness. How distinct is the language used by Jews from that of local non-Jews? What is the (estimated, average) location on the historical continuum of Jewish linguistic distinctiveness³ (Gold 1981a, 1989; Prager 1986; Benor in press b; Hary submitted)?
2. Variation. How much linguistic variation exists within the community? To what extent do Jews speak the local non-Jewish language without distinctive features in certain situations?
3. Language recognition. To what extent do Jews and non-Jews recognize Jewish language as distinct? Is there a sense that Jews speak a distinctive dialect of the non-Jewish language or a completely different language? Is the language referred to with distinctive glottonyms? Have advocates undertaken status and corpus planning on behalf of the language (Fishman 1985b)?

Our answers to these 14 questions can then be correlated with socio-religious characteristics across Jewish communities, with socio-religious variables within a given Jewish community, and with contextual factors within a given speaker. In this way we can incorporate inter-communal, intra-communal, and intra-speaker variation into our understanding of Jewish language.

Socio-Religious Variables for Entire Communities (Inter-Communal Variation)

1. Co-territoriality. Does the community speak a variety of a local non-Jewish language, a post-co-territorial language, or both?⁴
2. Openness of society. To what extent are Jews emancipated (being Jewish is a personal choice, not dictated by government policy) or treated as a separate people and subject to residential, financial, occupational, and other restrictions?⁵
3. Demographic distinctiveness. To what extent are Jews different from non-Jews in residence, education, occupation, socio-economic status, birth rates, etc.?
4. Literacy levels. To what extent is literacy in the general society limited to the elite or easily accessible to the masses? How widespread is literacy within the Jewish community?
5. Political Zionism. Does the community exist before or after the dawn of political Zionism and the birth of the State of Israel? To what extent does the community participate in political Zionism and have a relationship with the State of Israel?

6. Textual authority. Does the community practice rabbinic or non-rabbinic Judaism? To what extent does the community study and revere biblical and rabbinic texts?
7. Communal origin. To what extent did the community arise through migration or through mass conversion?
8. Time from immigration. How many generations have passed since the community's major wave(s) of immigration to its current language territory?
9. Internal migration. To what extent has the community migrated within its current language territory?
10. Jewish population concentration. What percentage do Jews comprise in the local population (see Verschik 2007 on this factor in the emergence of Jewish Russian and other ethnolects)?

Certainly these are not the only socio-religious traits that might be analyzed. Research that examines each community's use of Hebrew/Aramaic, such as which words are borrowed and how they are pluralized and pronounced (e.g., Bunin 1981), might look for additional correlations. For example, in Weinreich's list of socio-religious traits to compare (1980, p. 54), he includes differences in liturgy and interpretation of laws and customs, as well as sources of authority derived from antecedent centers (Babylonia vs. Palestine).

In addition to comparing communities across time and space, we can shift our analytic focus to individuals or subgroups within a given community. We might examine how individuals' use of the distinctively Jewish linguistic repertoire (Variables 1–11) correlates with various social and religious variables.

Socio-Religious Variables for Individual Jews (Inter-Speaker/Intra-Communal Variation)

1. Integration/social networks. How much interaction do they have with non-Jews?
2. Religiosity. To what extent do they adhere to Jewish law and observe Jewish rituals (see Benor in press b)?
3. Learnedness. How proficient are they in reading, reciting, understanding, and commenting on Hebrew/Aramaic biblical and rabbinic texts (see Benor 2004b)?
4. Gender (see Bogoch 1999; Isaacs 1999; Benor 2004b; Held 2004; Fudeman 2006; Fader 2007).
5. Ancestral origins. In a community that includes various streams of historical migration, where did their ancestors come from (see Benor in press b on Sephardi and Ashkenazi American Jews)?
6. Jewish allegiances. How oriented are they toward various Jewish factions/movements? This will differ in every era/land depending on local factions, for example, Sabbateanism, Frankism, Bundism, and Zionism, American denominations, and Israeli political factions (see Benor

2004a; Fader 2007; Sacknowitz 2007 on variation among different types of Orthodox Jews in America).

Socio-Religious Variables for Different Contexts (Intra-Speaker Variation)

1. Audience. To what extent does their intended audience include Jews (including different types) or non-Jews (including those more or less connected with Jewish social networks)?
2. Topic. How Jewish/religious is the topic about which they are speaking/writing?
3. Setting. How Jewish is the setting of the speech (Jewish setting like synagogue, school, or private home vs. general public) or the venue of the writing (Jewish vs. general publisher/publication)?
4. Genre. Is the given excerpt of language spoken or written? What genre is it (informal speech, public lecture, newspaper article, poem, novel, etc.) (see Schwarzwald 2002, 2006 on genre variation in Judeo-Spanish)?

Questions like these will enable comparative analysis of Jewish linguistic repertoires around the world and throughout history. Experts in various Jewish languages might work together to answer these questions, formulate and test hypotheses, and arrive – collectively – at a more nuanced classification of Jewish languages.⁶

Conclusion

This article has discussed some of the issues that have been central to Jewish linguistic studies for the past century. I have proposed a new way of looking at Jewish language – a distinctive linguistic repertoire that Jews deploy selectively as they present themselves as Jews and as various types of Jews. And I have contributed to the long-standing tradition of comparative Jewish linguistics by offering a new research agenda: Jewish communities in different eras and regions can be compared according to a number of social and religious dimensions, and we can see how those differences correlate with linguistic variables.

The approach presented here follows the recent tradition of envisioning Jewish languages as existing along a continuum. But it explodes that continuum into dozens of dimensions (by no means an exhaustive list), rendering it impossible to represent in a linear model. In other words, by including so many variables, I have shown that the situation is more ‘messy’ than the analyst might like. The agenda proposed here enables us to straighten out much of this messiness, but it is not without problems. One problem is how we might operationalize the socio-religious and linguistic variables. Most of them are quantitative in nature, but it would be very difficult to quantify them consistently, especially when we wish to compare communities in different eras. While we might assign a numeric value to time from immigration, literacy levels, and Jewish population

concentration, how can we quantify ‘openness of society’ and ‘demographic distinctiveness’? We might count the number of Hebrew/Aramaic words in a given linguistic repertoire (e.g., Mark 1954; Schwarzwald 1982; even that enterprise has problems), but how can we quantify overall linguistic distinctiveness? And how can we compare a corpus of all speech and writing accessible to researchers (available only in the present) with a corpus limited mostly to the written language of learned men?

Even if some aspects are not conducive to precise quantitative correlation, I believe that the proposed model offers a more realistic way of looking at Jewish language and its relation to Jewish identity. And its implications are not limited to linguistic studies. This model might be adapted to analyze Jewish art, music, food, and clothing, for example. By analyzing cultural practices like these as distinctive repertoires that correlate with socio-religious variables, and by connecting historical with contemporary research, we might increase our understanding of Jewish culture and identity throughout history and around the world. Similarly, the proposed model can be tailored to studies of linguistic and cultural practices among other ethnic, religious, and diasporic groups. For example, see Stillman (1991) on the similarities between Jewish and Muslim languages and Hary & Wein (2005) on the similarities between Jewish and Christian languages.

The primary goal of comparative Jewish linguistics is to gain a better understanding of how Jews in all places and eras have used language. The secondary goals are to contribute to our knowledge of Jewish history and society and to our knowledge of linguistics, especially language contact, language and religion, and language and ethnicity. The comparative research program proposed here can help us attain all of these goals. And the theoretical construct of the distinctively Jewish linguistic repertoire helps to describe the sociolinguistic situation in a more realistic way and to facilitate comparative analysis. By comparing Jewish language use in many times and places, we can gain a better understanding of Jews, of language, and of the fascinating phenomenon of Jewish languages.

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Short Biography

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Notes

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¹ This definition leads to a difficult question: How does the analyst delimit the territory and time period? These decisions must be made on a case-by-case basis, taking into account political, geographic, and linguistic boundaries, as well as political, demographic, cultural, and linguistic developments. While decisions about how to limit the analysis necessarily involve some arbitrariness and subjectivity, they are necessary for comparative analysis.

² Note that this question is relevant only to languages spoken/written after the establishment of political Zionism and, especially, the establishment of the State of Israel.

³ Of course, it is impossible to quantify overall distinctness, especially given the vast variation that exists within any given community. But a researcher might make general, qualified claims estimating that one Jewish group speaks or writes – on average – more distinctly from its neighbors than another Jewish group. For example, we might say that Yiddish in Slavic lands has been much more distinct than Judeo-Persian in Persian lands or that eighteenth-century Judeo-Arabic in Egypt was more distinct than twentieth-century Judeo-French in France. These statements would be qualified by the important point that some Jews in twentieth-century France may have spoken more distinctly from their Christian neighbors than some Jews in eighteenth-century Egypt spoke distinctly from their Muslim neighbors. Comparisons like these – especially those spanning centuries and continents – are necessarily abstract and overgeneralized. But at the same time they can shed light on similarities and differences among Jewish communities throughout history and around the world.

⁴ While this is, of course, a linguistic variable, it is presented with the socio-religious variables, as it might be used as an independent variable in correlational analyses.

⁵ Note that these dimensions are complicated and not mutually exclusive. For example, consider the Soviet policies of forced religious and cultural assimilation, which were enforced at the same time as Jews were officially identified as ethnically distinct.

⁶ See work toward this goal in the Jewish Language Research Wiki at <http://sites.google.com/site/jewishlanguageswiki/distinctive-jewish-linguistic-repertoires>.

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