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PROF. WOLF MOSKOVICH

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JEWS AND SLAVS

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Edited by
Wolf Moskovich (Jerusalem)

YIDDISH – A JEWISH NATIONAL LANGUAGE AT 100

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The vitality of Yiddish among Hasidic infants and toddlers in a low SES preschool in Brooklyn

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Abstract *The first study of the acquisition of Yiddish by young children reported here was triggered by a) the growing awareness by the Early Childhood Center Yeled V'Yalda, Brooklyn, New York, of a need for a language assessment tool for the fast growing number of Yiddish-learning pre-schoolers to better serve them and b) the identification of demographic and linguistic factors that characterize the Hasidic Yiddish-speaking community that enabled us to investigate issues at the core of current theoretical debates in the fields of language acquisition and bilingualism and to address clinical and educational concerns. This project was made possible by the development of innovative research strategies adapted to this cultural and linguistic group. The findings that emerge from the data collection on 82 children between 14 and 38 months reveal that when Yiddish is the home-language it tends to be the dominant language in that it is used at least 75% of the time. The comparative analyses of the pattern of lexical and morphosyntactic development across different groups exposed to different percentages of Yiddish and English reveal: a) an effect of percentage of exposure on lexical development; b) differences between the use of decontextualized language in each language in the same bilinguals and c) a lack of effect of percentage of exposure on children exposed up to 50% Yiddish on the order of acquisition of different constructions and on the age at which they are acquired. Additionally the data on balanced bilinguals confirm previous findings on the effects of rich morphological paradigms on the order of acquisition of constructions in the two languages and sheds an interesting light on the relation between vocabulary and morphosyntactic development. The theoretical, clinical and educational implications of these findings are discussed. This study provides strong systematic empirical evidence for the vitality of Yiddish among Hasidic infants and toddlers enrolled in the pre-school center Yeled V'Yalda and demonstrates that the various demographic and linguistic contexts in which these children are raised enable us to address issues that are relevant to bilinguals acquiring different language combinations.*

1. Introduction

Nine criteria have been identified to measure the vitality (and hence the level of endangerment) of a language (Fishman, 1991, UNESCO, 2003). These include:

1. Intergenerational language transmission;
2. Availability of materials for language education and literacy;
3. Community members' attitudes towards their own language;
4. Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies, official status and use;
5. Shifts in domains of language use;
6. Response to new domain and media;
7. Type and quality of documentation;
8. Absolute number of speakers;
9. Proportion of speakers within the total population.

The aims of this chapter are two fold. First it is to empirically evaluate the scope of the intergenerational transmission of Yiddish in the Hasidic population in Brooklyn (criterion 1 above) (see Isaacs, 1999, 2004 and Katz, 2006 on the need for such a contribution) and to address several other criteria listed above with respect to the vitality of Yiddish. Secondly, it also demonstrates that the exceptionally varied demographic and linguistic environments in which Hasidic Yiddish-speaking children are raised provide an ideal research context in which to address psycholinguistic issues that are central to current theories and that have profound and broad educational and clinical implications.

2. Context of this study

According to the US 2000 census, 178,945 speakers of Yiddish reside in the United States. They constitute 0.06 % of the US population and 0.38% of US residents who speak a language other than English. The majority (63%) are concentrated in the New York State area. In Brooklyn, according to the New York City Department of City Planning (2004) report, two areas have recently undergone tremendous increases in the number of Yiddish speakers: (i) 22, 407 Yiddish speakers over 5 years of age resided in Brooklyn Community District 1 (that includes

Williamsburg) in 2000, that is the result of a 34.1% increase in number of speakers between 1990 and 2000. In 1990 they constituted 17.1% of the population of their district and in 2000 21.1%. In this district more than half (55.3%) the speakers of all minority languages reported their lack of proficiency in English. In 2000 28.5% of the district residents spoke English only and the next largest linguistic group is made up of speakers of Spanish and Spanish Creoles, followed by speakers of Yiddish (21.3%), Polish (16.7%) and Chinese (2.9%).

(ii) 32,889 Yiddish speakers over 5 years of age resided in Brooklyn Community District 12 (that includes Borough Park) in 2000, that is the result of a 30% increase in number of speakers between 1990 and 2000. In 1990 they constituted 28.2% of the population of their district and in 2000 27.9%. Half of the users (49.2%) of all minority languages reported they do not speak English very well. In 2000, 38.8% of the residents spoke English only and the largest linguistic minority is the Yiddish-speaking community (27.9%) followed by speakers of Spanish/Spanish Creole (17.7%), Chinese (12.4%) and Russian (11.5%).

These figures demonstrate that a) the number of Yiddish speakers is increasing in these two districts and b) the Yiddish-speaking community constitutes a substantial proportion of the residents of these two districts- two factors that facilitate the vitality of a language according to the Fishman (1991) and UNESCO (2003) criteria listed above. The examinations of the linguistic breakdowns pertaining to other districts demonstrates that this change is not the result of leaving other Brooklyn or New York districts or US states (US census 2000). Nor is it the outcome of immigration trends outlined in Fix & Passel (2003). Instead the high birth rate of the Yiddish-speaking community best accounts for these demographic changes that triggered the need for a range of health and educational services addressing the needs of Yiddish-speaking children.

Yeled V'Yalda Early Childhood Center (henceforth YVY) was originally founded 28 years ago to serve the Hasidic communities of Brooklyn. It first served 80 children in Williamsburg. Since then it has grown and now provides services to more than 2,000 (0 to year 5 year old) children in education programs, 3,500 (between 6 months and 21 years of age) in clinical services (including speech and language pathology, physical and educational therapy) and 4,000 in the nutrition programs. YVY locations are spread across Staten Island and Brooklyn. In Brooklyn, four sites are located in Williamsburg and ten in Borough Park (see figure 1 below). YVY serves low income populations and is funded by a range of federal sources, New York State and New York City and private funds. YVY's distinctive features include: a) the exceptionally high number of children- it is one of the two largest Head Start in New York City, b) the very high proportion (almost 70%) of children whose home language is not English compared to the proportion of 30% at a national level that will be reached by 2015 (Fix & passel, 2005); c) the exceptionally broad range of ethnic, cultural and linguistic communities- more than 15 languages are used by YVY children in addition to English and Yiddish and they include Arabic, Farsi, Haitian Creole, Hebrew, Spanish and Russian and d) the comprehensiveness of the education and health services it provides. Indeed its mission is to provide low SES boys (*yeled*) and girls (*yalda*) with a professional preschool education focusing on the whole child and the family (see figure 2).

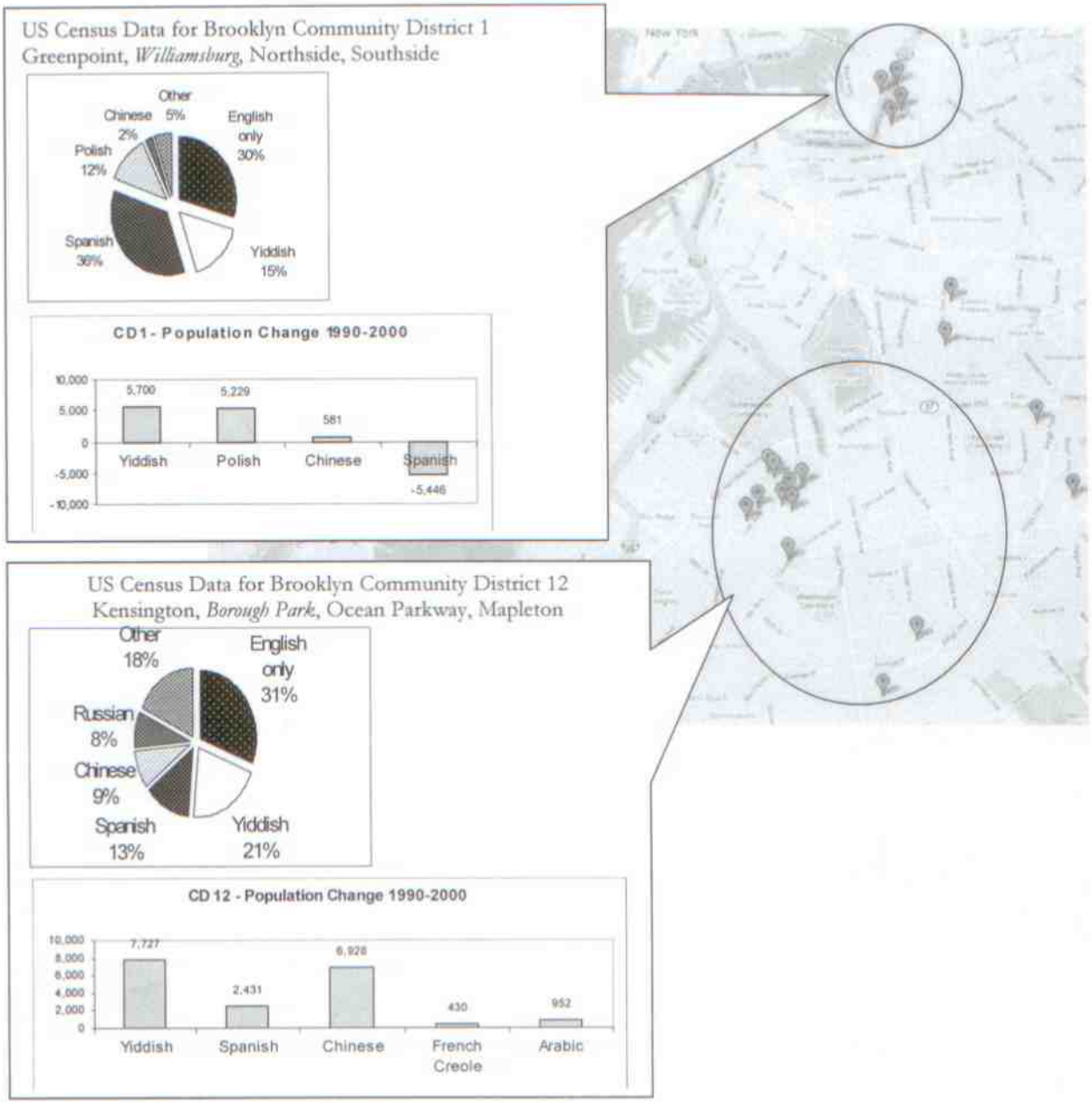
While it now provides services to an exceptionally broad cross-section of diverse cultural and ethnic groups, the Yiddish-speaking Hasidic children still represent a substantial proportion of its population: out of 2,257 children enrolled in education programs (between 0 and 5), 1,218 (that is 53.9%) have Yiddish as a Home Language according to YVY central enrolment database. Across all education programs at YVY, more than 20% of the children qualify for an Individualized Education Plan that enables YVY Special Education services to address the learning needs of these children who exhibit delayed or impaired development. Given the number of Yiddish-speaking children who exhibit typical and atypical development served by Yeled V'Yalda, it is not surprising that professionals working there have expressed the needs for language assessments tools adapted to Yiddish-speaking children.

3. Conducting the first study¹ on the acquisition of Yiddish by Hasidic children

3.1 Challenges

At least three obstacles had prevented the study of the acquisition of Yiddish by Hasidic children. First Yiddish is not viewed as a legitimate object of study by Yiddish-speaking Hasidim- in that it distracts from religious studies. Yiddish is assigned such a high cultural value that it cannot be compared with other languages (Isaacs, 1999, 2004). Secondly Hasidic communities value the religious education of men over their secular knowledge. Women are encouraged more than men to pursue a slightly higher level of secular

Figure 1: Yeled VYalda locations (indicated with markers) and US census figures for Brooklyn Community Districts 1 & 12



vocational education. However traditionally college studies are eschewed. This varies across individuals and religious groups and may be currently changing. For instance, YVY has been at the forefront of the professionalization of members of this community by recruiting teachers and therapist with high credentials (the majority of YVY teachers have master degrees) and fostering further professional development. Still education and training tend to focus on vocational professional courses at colleges that accommodate religious needs. In consequence very few members of the communities acquire the research training required to study Yiddish and/or develop language assessment tools for their community. In addition, linguistic descriptions and analyses of

