

## Animacy effects in contemporary Hasidic Yiddish

Yiddish, the traditional Germanic language of Ashkenazi Jews, is maintained today as a minority language only in some Hasidic communities in the US, Israel and Europe. In these communities, Yiddish is used as an insider code with family and friends, while all adult speakers also use the majority language, mainly English in the US, Canada and the UK and Hebrew in Israel.

The extensive impact of the contact languages as well as the lack of normative pressures seem to accelerate linguistic changes in these communities. The present talk focuses on several linguistic changes where animacy effects surface in the grammar of Hasidic Yiddish. Animacy - the distinction between animate and inanimate entities (or between humans and non-humans) - is a universal semantic feature of human language, but its effects vary. In languages with active grammatical animacy, animacy constrains morphosyntactic patterns, whereas in other languages the impact of animacy is less overtly salient. A preliminary study identified new animacy effects in spoken Hasidic Yiddish. Grammatical animacy was hardly evident in Hasidic Yiddish up to the late 1990s, but now it is increasingly controlling two number agreement patterns, the assignment of gender and the marking of direct objects.

The talk will be dedicated to two emerging animacy-based number agreement patterns:

1. Animacy based verbal agreement: plural verbal agreement is always maintained with animate plural nominal subjects, but it is usually lost with inanimate plural nominal subjects.

e.g.: *di mentshn veln geyn* 'the people will go' (plural verbal agreement), but:

<i>di</i>	<i>veytig-n</i>	<i>ve-t</i>	<i>aribergeyn</i>	<i>in gantsn</i>
the	pain-PL	will-3SG	go_over.INF	altogether
'the pains will go away completely'				

This phenomenon is found in several languages, such as Turkish, where verbs can agree only with animate or human nouns (Comrie 1989:191; Corbett 2006:190–191).

## 2. Animacy based number marking of possessive pronouns

In East European Yiddish, possessive pronouns that precede the noun have a short form used with possessed singular nouns (e.g. *mayn bukh* ‘my book’, *dayn kind* ‘your child’), and a longer form with the suffix –e used with possessed plural nouns (e.g. *mayne bikher* ‘my books’, *dayne kinder* ‘your children’).

The new emerging pattern attested in contemporary recordings is such that the number distinction is maintained only when the possessed noun is human (*mayn kind*, *mayne kinder*), but the short form marks both singular and plural non-human possessed nouns (*mayn bukh*, *mayn bikher*).

Analysis of the changing agreement patterns considers the impact of the sociolinguistic setting of Hasidic Yiddish, as well the impact of the contact languages. Both changes seem to reflect a process of loss (loss of the plural/longer forms, accelerated by the Hasidic Yiddish sociolinguistic setting). Since animate elements are more resistant to loss, they may maintain morphological distinctions that have been lost in inanimate elements (Comrie 1989:194). This way, animacy can “surface” suddenly in the grammar, demonstrating Comrie’s observation that “animacy can be a relevant parameter in language change even where it is not particularly salient in the synchronic state of the language prior to the change, thus suggesting that animacy is a universal conceptual category that exists independently of its realization in any particular language.” (Comrie 1989:186).

## References

- Comrie, B. 1989. *Language universals and linguistic typology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Corbett, G. 2006. *Agreement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.