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## Mensch, bentsh, and balagan: Variation in the American Jewish linguistic repertoire

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## ABSTRACT

Based on a large-scale survey, this paper argues that the speech of American Jews should be analyzed not as a separate ethnolect or language variety but as English with a repertoire of distinctive linguistic features stemming from Yiddish, Hebrew, Aramaic, and other sources. Jews make selective use of this repertoire as they index their identities as Jews and as certain types of Jews. Older Jews, Orthodox Jews, and non-Orthodox Jews who are highly engaged in religious life use different Hebrew and Yiddish words and grammatical constructions and different Hebrew pronunciations. Some Jews use distinctive meanings of Yiddish words, regional pronunciations of English words, or discourse styles. These trends are analyzed in relation to ethnolinguistic variation and Jewish languages.

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### 1. Introduction

- a. *'In de meedle de coldest vedder he crossed de ice in a leetle boat, he should cetch de Bridish an' de missionaries foolink around, not mit deir minds on de var!'* ('In the middle of the coldest weather, he crossed the ice in a little boat in order to catch the British and the missionaries fooling around, not thinking about the war!') (Leo Rosten, *The Education of H\*Y\*M\*A\*N K\*A\*P\*L\*A\*N*, 1937).
- b. 'I can't believe [your grandson] Jeremy co-chaired the [Jewish Federation] campaign: he's always been a *mensch*,<sup>1</sup> and now he's a real *macher*. You must be *shepping* so much *naches* right now.' (*mensch*: good person; *macher*: mover and shaker; *shep naches*: derive pride/joy.)
- c. 'The *sugya* we're *learning* is too *lomdish* to say *outside*.' ('The topic [in the Gemora] we're studying is too complicated to summarize.') (Weiser, 1995, p. 92).
- d. 'After I was *bar mitzvahed*, I only went to *temple* for *tikkun olam* events.' (After I had my 13-year-old coming-of-age ceremony, I only went to synagogue for community action events [*tikkun olam*: lit. 'repairing the world'].)
- e. 'Halfway through the (full *kriyah*) *Torah* reading, it was announced that one could opt to join a *niggun* circle or *Torah* reading upstairs. . . I'm pleased to say that *egal minyan* hopping in the Carroll Gardens/Park Slope area is quaint but sufficient. After shul I joined a group of 8 folks, half of whom had made it to *davening* that morning. Following a delicious pescetarian (though vegan-friendly) meal. . .<sup>2</sup> (full *kriyah*: full weekly Torah reading, as opposed to a smaller section read in some congregations; *niggun*: melody; *egal*: egalitarian according to gender (women can participate fully); *minyan*: prayer group, lit. 'quorum'; *shul*: synagogue; *davening*: praying; *pescetarian*: vegetarian but with fish).

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E-mail address: [sbenor@huc.edu](mailto:sbenor@huc.edu)<sup>1</sup> Transcription of Hebrew and Yiddish words is based on norms common among American Jews (see Steinmetz (2005:xiii) on the established norms of some loanwords within the 'morass of haphazard spellings'). Words and pronunciation options from the survey are rendered as they were in the survey.<sup>2</sup> <http://jewschool.com/2008/01/07/13013/egal-davening-new-horizons-or-slippery-park-slope-of-treif/> (accessed 2010-04-26).

All five of these quotes might be used by Jews living in America, and all five are mostly English with some influences from Yiddish, Hebrew, and Aramaic. But anyone who says one of them would be unlikely to say the others. What has been called 'Jewish American English' (e.g., Steinmetz, 1981, 1986; Gold, 1985, 1986; Benor, 2000, 2004a) is not a uniform linguistic entity spoken by a uniform group of Jews. It is an abstract umbrella term representing the English-based speech of Jews in America, and it encompasses a great deal of inter-speaker and intra-speaker variation. This paper offers an overview of this variation, based on data from a large-scale survey.

According to the survey, Jews' use of linguistic features correlates with several factors: age, generation from immigration, languages spoken by ancestors, religious observance, traditional learnedness, social networks, and denominational affiliation (especially whether they are Orthodox). Individuals are often familiar with linguistic features that they do not use, and they use different variants when speaking to different audiences. These data suggest a good deal of agency: American Jews have access to various elements of a distinctive linguistic repertoire, and they make conscious and subconscious decisions about which linguistic features to use as they perform their identities as Jews and as certain types of Jews.

## 2. Distinctive linguistic repertoire

There is considerable controversy over how to conceptualize distinctive language used by members of minority groups. Scholars in Europe and Australia have used the term 'ethnolect' to refer to 'a variety of the majority language (or 'host language'), which is used and regarded as a vernacular for speakers of a particular ethnic descent and is marked by certain contact phenomena' (Androutopoulos, 2001, p. 2, cited in Jaspers, 2008; see similar definition in Clyne, 2000). North American and British variationist sociolinguists often refer to the same concept with different terminology: an ethnic 'dialect,' 'language variety,' 'code,' or 'system.' But, as several scholars have pointed out, the notion of a bounded linguistic entity used by an ethnic group is fraught with theoretical problems (e.g., Fought, 2006; Eckert, 2008; Jaspers, 2008; Benor, 2010). Not all members of an ethnic group use the ethnolect, and those who do may use some linguistic features and not others. An example is Newman's research on the English speech of Latinos in New York. He found that speakers made variable use of Spanish-origin features: while most used light /l/, only a few used syllable-timed prosody and even fewer spirantized intervocalic /d/ (Newman, 2010; see also Slomanson and Newman, 2005). If we take this variation into account, the notion of 'ethnolect' is problematic.

A more realistic way to approach ethnic language use is the notion that each ethnic group has a **distinctive linguistic repertoire** (Benor, 2008b, 2010). This is defined as a fluid set of linguistic resources that members of an ethnic group may use variably as they index their ethnic identities. In this approach, members of a given ethnic group are seen as using the local language in conjunction with their distinctive repertoire. In contrast to previous work on 'repertoire,' which tends to refer to a set of *language varieties* used by a given speaker or community, this notion of 'repertoire' involves *linguistic resources* at all levels of language, including phonology, morphosyntax, prosody, discourse, and lexicon, as well as, among bilinguals, code switching. This theoretical construct facilitates analysis of ethnic group members' language use. After researchers identify which linguistic resources comprise the group's repertoire, they can investigate inter-speaker and intra-speaker variation and their social and situational correlates.

The distinctive linguistic repertoire available to Jews in the United States includes elements at all levels of language. Some reflect language contact, including thousands of loanwords from Yiddish, textual Hebrew/Aramaic, and Israeli Hebrew<sup>3</sup>; grammatical constructions and discourse markers from Yiddish and Israeli Hebrew; and intonational patterns from Yiddish, Israeli Hebrew, and Talmud study (Benor, 2004a). The repertoire also includes phonological features of New York regional speech (Knack, 1991) and other vowel distinctions (Labov, 1966; Laferriere, 1979; Sacknowitz, 2007), frequent word-final /t/ release (Benor, 2001, 2004b; Levon, 2006), and elements of an aggressive discourse style (Tannen, 1981; Schiffrin, 1984).

As the quotes at the beginning of this paper suggest, not all Jews use all of these linguistic features. An in-depth study of who uses which features and when would involve years of recording and analysis, as well as a multi-million dollar budget. In the meantime, we can begin to analyze socio-religious patterns in the use of certain linguistic features by looking at speakers' self-reports.

## 3. Methodology

In collaboration with sociologist Steven M. Cohen, I conducted a large-scale online survey. We created a questionnaire that asked about knowledge and use of linguistic features, as well as Jewish background and other demographic traits. We edited the survey tool based on a pilot run with 61 respondents, representing diverse groups of Jews and non-Jews. Self-identified Jews and non-Jews were routed differently in the survey, so that Jews were given 153 items and non-Jews were given 112 items.<sup>4</sup>

In the summer of 2008, several hundred Jews and non-Jews, representing diverse backgrounds, were invited to take the survey and to pass the invitation along to others. This snowball 'sampling' method was highly successful, yielding over 40,000 responses from diverse Jews and non-Jews. For this paper, I have limited the sample to those who grew up and

<sup>3</sup> Many words exist in Yiddish, textual Hebrew, textual Aramaic, and Israeli Hebrew and, when used in English, can trace their etymologies to some or all of these languages in combination (Benor, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> For additional analysis and results of items not discussed in this paper, see Benor (in press) and Benor and Cohen (2009, in press).

now live in the United States and report speaking only English as a child: 25,179 Jews and 4874 non-Jews. This non-random sample<sup>5</sup> includes Jews of all ages, ancestral origins, denominations, levels of religious observance, forms of Jewish education, social networks, and regions. Because of the nature of the survey distribution, the sample likely overrepresents Jews and non-Jews who have Jewish friends. In addition, comparisons to the National Jewish Population Survey (Kotler-Berkowitz et al., 2003) indicate that the current sample of Jews is somewhat biased toward those with more Jewish religious engagement. Therefore, the sample should not be used to make broad claims about Americans or American Jews in general but can be used, with caution, to explore relationships among sub-groups.

The survey method is not a common one for variationist sociolinguistics, which continues to look to analysis of recorded speech as the gold standard. However, it has been used fruitfully in a number of studies (e.g., Dubois and Melançon, 1997; Chambers, 1998; Dubois and Horvath, 1999; Boberg, 2005), including one about Jews' attitudes toward Hebrew and Yiddish (Hudson-Edwards, 1980). A survey is particularly useful for research on the use of salient linguistic variables in a large population. I tested dozens of loanwords from Hebrew, Yiddish, and Aramaic, several Yiddish-influenced grammatical constructions and phrases, lexical options (e.g., Passover vs. Pesach), and regional pronunciations (e.g., merry and Mary). These features were carefully selected as a representative sample of the many linguistic features I have observed diverse groups of Jews using in English. Although I am eager to check for correlations between social variables and the Israeli Hebrew click discourse marker (Benor, 2004a), word-final /t/ release (Benor, 2001, 2004b; Levon, 2006), and the height of /ae/ in 'candle' (Benor, 2004a) or /oh/ in 'coffee' (Knack, 1991; Sacknowitz, 2007), I felt that most people would have difficulty commenting on their use of these subtle variables. And although I would have liked to ask about hundreds of other loanwords (including many that respondents mentioned in the comments area), it was necessary to keep the survey to a manageable length. A shortcoming of the survey method is that we cannot be sure that respondents are accurately reporting their speech patterns. However, the results do correspond to my observations of speech and writing among American Jews of various denominations, ages, and levels of learnedness (Benor, 2009).

The survey asked many questions about demographics, including language abilities, Jewish observance, Jewish education, and social networks. Based on extensive analysis, I found these nine factors to be the most important independent variables:

1. Age-generation: A scale combining age and how close they are in generation to their ancestors' immigration to the US (the two are highly correlated).
2. Aramaic: Comprehension of Talmudic Aramaic.
3. Friends: % of their close friends now who are Jewish.
4. Israel: Length of longest visit to Israel.
5. New York: Whether they have ever lived in New York.
6. Orthodoxy: Whether they consider themselves Orthodox.<sup>6</sup>
7. Shabbat: Whether they refrain from handling money on Shabbat (following a traditional Jewish proscription).<sup>7</sup>
8. Synagogue: How often they attend Jewish religious services currently.
9. Yiddish ancestry: Whether any of their ancestors who came to this country spoke Yiddish.

The findings below are based mostly on these independent variables.

Because this list includes both categorical and gradient variables, we turn to logistic regression, a powerful statistical tool that helps us disentangle the independent effects of several variables. Take, for example, the Talmudic Aramaic word *kal vachomer* ('all the moreso'), which is common in several Jewish languages, including the speech of some American Jews. Cross-tabulations show greater use of this word (and others) among Jews who are Orthodox, have stronger comprehension of Talmudic Aramaic, refrain from handling money on Shabbat, attend synagogue more frequently, have lived in New York, are younger, have spent more time in Israel, have more close friends who are Jewish, and have Yiddish-speaking ancestors. However, it is possible that some of these factors merely seem to be important because of interaction effects: perhaps Jews who have lived in New York are more likely to be Orthodox, and perhaps Jews who refrain from handling money on Shabbat are more likely to be young. Logistic regression allows us to disentangle these factors and determine which has an independent effect, as well as the relative strength of each variable.

A logistic regression (see Table 1) analysis shows that most of these variables do have an independent effect (see Table 1). According to the *B* and  $\text{Exp}(B)$  statistics, by far the greatest effects are whether individuals handle money on Shabbat, their Aramaic comprehension, and whether they are Orthodox. Age/generation also has an independent effect, but it is negative: those who are younger and farther from the generation of immigration are more likely to use *kal vachomer*. Synagogue attendance, length of stay in Israel, and Jewish friends have a weaker effect. Whether they lived in New York and have Yiddish-speaking ancestors do not have significant independent effects.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> It is very difficult and expensive to obtain a random sample of American Jews. Recent large-scale studies have been criticized for underrepresenting ultra-Orthodox Jews, young Jewish adults, and Jews who do not consider themselves Jewish by religion. See, for example, Kadushin et al. (2005).

<sup>6</sup> 'Orthodox' combines the options 'Modern Orthodox,' 'Orthodox,' and 'Black Hat/Yeshivish or Chassidish.'

<sup>7</sup> Shabbat observance and Orthodoxy overlap a good deal, but of the 2808 Jews in the sample who refrain from handling money on Shabbat, only half are Orthodox. And of the 1800 Jews who identify as Orthodox, only 77% refrain from handling money on Shabbat. This sample probably overrepresents the frequency of non-Orthodox Shabbat observers in the actual American population.

<sup>8</sup> Because the data set is so large, the confidence margin is set high: I include factors as significant if  $p \leq 0.001$  and if the odds ratio ( $\text{Exp}(B)$ ) is  $\geq 1.2$  or  $\leq 0.8$ .

**Table 1**Logistic regression for kal vachomer among Jewish respondents ( $N = 24,719$ ).

	<i>B</i>	SE	Sig.	Exp( <i>B</i> )
No money handling on Shabbat	1.266	0.113	0.000	3.546
Aramaic comprehension	1.123	0.048	0.000	3.074
Orthodox	0.897	0.112	0.000	2.452
Age–generation	−0.499	0.092	0.000	0.607
Synagogue attendance frequency	0.408	0.046	0.000	1.504
Israel – length of stay	0.319	0.023	0.000	1.376
% friends who are Jewish	0.246	0.053	0.000	1.279
Lived in NY	0.220	0.088	0.012	1.246
Yiddish-speaking ancestors	0.176	0.145	0.225	1.192
Constant	−9.993	0.299	0.000	0.000

−2Log likelihood: 4263.311; Nagelkerke  $R^2$ : 0.548.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Loanwords

In Jewish communities throughout history, a common linguistic feature has been loanwords from Hebrew and Aramaic (mostly from biblical and rabbinic texts). This is the case among Jews in America, where there are also two additional sources of loanwords: contemporary Israeli Hebrew and the language of the largest immigrant group of Jews, Eastern Yiddish. The use of loanwords is generally quite salient (Jews are often aware that they or others are using loanwords), and Jews make regular use of loanwords to indicate to their audiences not only that they are Jewish but also that they are a certain type of Jew. The survey tested dozens of loanwords, asking respondents whether they have heard them and whether they use them only with Jews or with both Jews and non-Jews. Several categories of loanwords emerge:

#### 4.1.1. American English (Table 2)

Only one word we tested is used by almost all Jews and non-Jews: *klutz*. Only 1% of non-Jews report that they have never heard this word, and only 7% of Jews use it when speaking to Jews but not to non-Jews. This word can be considered part of American English. Many people do not even recognize its Yiddish origins. The regression analysis selects only one factor as significant for *klutz*: age–generation (negative). Younger Jews who are farther removed from the generation of immigration are slightly more likely than their elders to use *klutz*. Over the past several decades, this word has integrated into American English, and it is likely not used to index Jewish identity.

*Shpiel* seems to be on a similar trajectory. Younger Jews are somewhat more likely to use it than their elders. Older Jews are much more likely than younger Jews to reserve *shpiel* for their speech to Jews. The regression selected Yiddish ancestry and age–generation (negative) as the only significant factors. While some still see this word as distinctly Jewish, it seems to be integrating into the English language.

#### 4.1.2. Crossover Yiddish (Table 3)

Another category of loanwords is Yiddish-origin words that are used by most Jews and by large numbers of non-Jews but still seem to be doing some Jewish identity work. The regressions indicate that Yiddish ancestry and Jewish friends are important in all of them. Age–generation is also significant for all of them: *shmutz* is used more by younger Jews, and the others are used more by older Jews. New York living is important in *shmutz* and *maven*, and synagogue attendance is

**Table 2**

Yiddish loanwords in American English.

Word	Language of origin, gloss	Jews use it (%)	Non-Jews use it (%)
klutz	Yid. 'clumsy person'	98	96
shpiel	Yid. '(lengthy) speech, pitch, performance'	83	64

**Table 3**

Crossover Yiddish loanwords.

Word	Language of origin, gloss	Jews use it (%)	Non-Jews use it (%)
kvetch	Yid. 'complain'	93	54
shmutz	Yid. 'dirt'	85	52
mensch	Yid. 'good person'	94	44
maven	Yid., Heb. 'expert, whiz'	75	43

important in *mensch*. Large numbers of Jews (32–43%) use these words only when talking to Jews. These ‘crossover Yiddish’ words, while used by many non-Jews, are still associated with Jewishness.

#### 4.1.3. Older Jews’ Yiddish (Table 4)

Several words, including *macher*, *naches*, and *heimish*, are used by a majority of Jewish respondents and few non-Jewish ones. Age–generation was selected as the most important factor in the use of all of these words: older Jews are much more likely than younger Jews to use them. Yiddish ancestry and Jewish friends were also important, and the religious factors (Orthodoxy, synagogue, Aramaic, Shabbat) had a significant but weaker effect. These words are still important in the speech of older Jews of Yiddish-speaking ancestry, and they clearly indicate Jewishness.

#### 4.1.4. Israeli Hebrew (Table 5)

The next category is Israeli Hebrew words, which are used by 17–22% of Jews and virtually no non-Jews. Time spent in Israel is selected as the most important factor, and the religious factors and Jewish friends are also significant. Age–generation (negative) is significant for *yofi* and especially for *yallah*, an Israeli Hebrew slang word borrowed from Arabic. These words are clearly important for the construction of Jewish identity, especially in terms of connection to Israel. In fact, those who feel more emotionally attached to Israel are somewhat more likely to use these words, and those who feel closer to Israelis are much more likely to use them.

#### 4.1.5. Religious words (Table 6)

The final category is words that are used more by religiously oriented Jews, including *bentsh*, *drash*, and *chas v’shalom*. Shabbat observance was selected as the most or second most important factor for all of these words. Whether or not they identify as Orthodox, Jews who observe Shabbat by not handling money tend to spend several hours each weekend praying, eating, studying, and chatting with like-minded Jews. They have ample opportunity to hear and use the loanwords in this list.

**Table 4**  
Yiddish loanwords used by older Jews.

Word	Language of origin, gloss	Jews use it (%)	Non-Jews use it (%)
nu?	Yid., Heb.: ‘well? (expresses impatience)’	66	9
macher	Yid. ‘important person, mover and shaker’	68	6
yahrtzeit	Yid. ‘anniversary of a death’	84	N/A <sup>a</sup>
naches	Yid. Heb. ‘pride, joy’	71	6
heimish	Yid. ‘cozy, homey’	59	4
bashert	Yid. ‘predestined match’	66	3

<sup>a</sup> Some stimuli relating to the religious sphere were presented only to those who self-identified as Jewish.

**Table 5**  
Israeli Hebrew loanwords.

Word	Language of origin, gloss	Jews use it (%)	Non-Jews use it (%)
yofi	Heb. ‘nice’	22	1
balagan	Heb., Yid. ‘mess, bedlam’	20	1
yallah	Heb., Arab. ‘let’s go’	17	2

**Table 6**  
Loanwords used by Jews highly engaged in religious life.

Word	Language of origin, gloss	Jews use it (%)	Non-Jews use it (%)
bentsh	Yid. ‘say Grace After Meals’; ‘bless’	33	N/A
tachlis	Yid., Heb. ‘practical details, bottom line’	26	2
takeh	Yid. ‘really’	22	1
drash	Yid., Heb. ‘sermonic commentary’	20	N/A
davka	Yid., Heb., Aram. ‘particularly, specifically’	17	1
leyn	Yid. ‘chant from the Torah’	16	N/A
chas v’shalom	Heb., Yid. ‘God forbid’	15	2
moadim l’simcha	Heb. ‘times of joy (holiday greeting)’	8	N/A
kal vachomer	Yid., Heb., Aram. ‘a fortiori, all the moreso’	7	N/A
l’chatchila	Heb. ‘ab initio, before the fact’	5	N/A
hameyvin yavin	Heb. ‘the cognoscenti will understand’	4	N/A
lav davka	Yid., Heb., Aram. ‘not necessarily, actually no’	3	N/A



Orthodoxy was selected as very important for most of these words, which supports previous research on the role of language in the construction of Orthodox identity (e.g., Weiser, 1995; Benor, 2004a; Fader, 2007). There were two words for which Orthodoxy was not selected, *hameyvin yavin* and *moadim l'simcha*, and one word that Orthodoxy was selected as disfavoring: *drash*. Perhaps Orthodox Jews have different ways of referring to these concepts. For the greeting between the holy days of a long holiday, they may prefer Yiddish-origin *a gutn mo(y)ed* over Sephardi-origin *moadim l'simcha*. And for 'sermonic commentary' they may prefer *drasha* (Yiddish *droshe*) over *drash*. Although these words are not predicted by Orthodoxy, they are predicted by Shabbat money handling, Aramaic comprehension, synagogue attendance, Israel visits, and Jewish friends. It is possible that these words serve to index non-Orthodox religious identity; indeed, I have heard them used by many non-Orthodox Jews who are textually knowledgeable and engaged in religious life.

Aramaic proficiency was significant for all words, which is expected for the Aramaic-origin words but a bit surprising for others, like *tachlis* and *bentsh*. This indicates the importance of Jewish textual education in the use of distinctive Jewish language. Age-generation plays little or no role in the use of most of these words, but it has an inverse effect for *drash* and *kal vachomer*. This suggests that these two words are becoming more common, even independent of the religious factors. Yiddish ancestry is significant only for Yiddish-origin *daven*, *bentsh*, and *leyn*, but even people of Sephardi and Mizrahi heritage use many of the Yiddish-origin words. It is clear that the words in this list are important in the construction of a religiously oriented Jewish identity that privileges rabbinic texts and the recent Eastern European past (see Benor, 2004a).

#### 4.1.6. Discussion of loanwords

Loanwords are central to the distinctive linguistic repertoire of American Jews. Some are used more by older Jews closer to the generation of immigration, and some are used more by Jews who are Jewishly knowledgeable and highly engaged in religious life. But individuals do not use these words merely because they have certain demographic characteristics. In fact, we find that Jews are often familiar with words but do not use them. The survey allowed respondents to check that they have heard a word but do not use it. For many words, a sizeable percentage of Jews checked that option. For example, while 26% of Jews say they use *tachlis*, 33% say they have heard it but do not use it. That means that over half of Jews are familiar with this word but only a quarter use it. When people are familiar with loanwords but choose not to use them, they may be making a statement about not belonging to a certain subgroup of Jews. It seems that Jews are using loanwords to align themselves with some people and distinguish themselves from others, that is, to indicate the subtleties of their Jewish identities.

When we look at all of the loanword regressions, we find that the factor that was selected as significant for the most loanwords is Jewish friends: the percent of close friends who are Jewish. This points to the importance of social networks in the use of loanwords. Even if people are far removed from the generation of immigration or do not have Yiddish-speaking ancestors, they may be friends with children of Yiddish speakers and pick up words like *heimish* and *naches* from them. Even if people have not studied Talmud and do not observe Shabbat traditionally, they may be friends with people who do and pick up words like *tachlis* and *chas v'shalom* from them. Or they may be friends with people who are friends with people who have these traits, and they may pick up the words from them. Sociolinguistic variation is not merely a product of an individual's experiences but also a social practice that develops in face-to-face interaction, especially among close friends.

#### 4.2. Word options and pronunciations

Up to this point, I have discussed whether or not people use a particular loanword. In linguistics it is more common to analyze a variable with two or more variants. With many of the loanwords discussed above, this type of analysis would be impossible. We might have asked 'Are you more likely to say 'maven' or 'expert'?' and 'Are you more like to say 'yofi' or 'nice'?' (see Bernstein, in press). However, these are not exact equivalents. Some loanwords, like *davka*, are even notoriously difficult to translate.

Despite this issue, we did find several word pairs/groups that we determined to be relatively equivalent, and we included these in the section of the questionnaire that was presented only to those who self-identified as Jewish. These options include English, Hebrew, and Yiddish words for the same referent, as well as various pronunciations influenced by Ashkenazi and Israeli Hebrew systems. In the Ashkenazi system, word stress is mostly penultimate, ancient Hebrew [θ] is realized as [s], the Hebrew *tsere* vowel is realized as [ey], and stressed [o] is realized as [oy]. In the Israeli system, word stress is mostly ultimate, ancient Hebrew [θ] is realized as [t], the Hebrew *tsere* vowel is realized as [ε], and stressed [o] is realized as [o].

Pre-testing indicated that we could not simply ask which variant Jews prefer, because many are aware of their own variation according to audience. Instead we asked about word options in matrix form and allowed for multiple checks in each row and column (see Fig. 1).

Other word groups we asked about in this way included:

- Springtime holiday: Passover, PAY-sach, PEH-sach, None.
- Jewish skullcap: yarmulke/ya-muh-kuh, KEE-pah, kee-PAH, None.
- Sabbath greeting: Shabbat Shalom, Good Shabbos, Gut Shabbos, None.

We also asked about alternative Hebrew pronunciations:

The greeting used between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur:

When I speak with ... I refer to the Jewish place of worship as:

	temple	synagogue	shul	None: I don't use this word when speaking to this group
Non-Jews				
Jews who are not engaged in religious life				
Jews who are engaged in religious life				

Fig. 1. Matrix question format.

- None: I don't use this word.
- gmar cha-tee-MAH to-VAH.
- gmar cha-TEE-mah TO-vah.
- gmar cha-SEE-mah TO-vah.
- gmar cha-SEE-mah TOY-vah.

The Festival of Booths:

- None: I don't use this word.
- SUK-kiss.
- soo-COAT.

My analysis centered on the 'Jews who are engaged in religious life' audience option. I performed a binary logistic regression analysis for each variant separately (because multiple checks were allowed).

My hypothesis, that Orthodox Jews would be much more likely to use the Yiddish words and the Ashkenazi variants, turned out to be correct. For each item, Orthodoxy was selected as the most important factor for at least one of the variants. For example, Orthodoxy is the top factor favoring *shul* (94% of Orthodox; 50% of non-Orthodox) and disfavoring *Passover* (8% of Orthodox; 39% of non-Orthodox). For the Festival of Booths, Orthodoxy is the top factor favoring *SUK-kiss* and disfavoring *soo-COAT*, and for the high holiday greeting, Orthodoxy is the top factor favoring all of the penultimate stress variants and disfavoring *gmar cha-tee-MAH to-VAH*.<sup>9</sup> In addition, we see fine distinctions among Orthodox Jews: those to the right of the continuum are more likely to report using the Ashkenazic variants (Table 7). Clearly word options and pronunciations play a major role in the performance of Orthodox identities.

Regression analysis points to another factor as significant in all of the word option variables: the age-generation scale. Being older and closer to immigration favors most of the Ashkenazi pronunciations and disfavors all of the Israeli ones. This is a reflection of the change in American Hebrew education: between the 1920s and 1960s, most Jewish schools switched from the Ashkenazi pronunciation brought to the US by Yiddish-speaking immigrants to a pronunciation system much more influenced by Israeli Hebrew. This change, which deserves further research, was likely related to an increase in Zionist sentiment and an influx of Israeli Hebrew teachers.

All of the other factors except Jewish friends are significant predictors for several of the variables, an important contrast to the loanwords discussed above. The word options all have referents in the Jewish religious sphere, and even people who have mostly Jewish friends vary widely in their use. The use of *SUK-kiss* rather than *soo-COAT* may index age or religiosity, and the use of *kee-PAH* rather than *KEE-pah* may index ideological connection to Israel and non-Orthodox or Modern Orthodox religiosity. The multiple lexical and phonological options available to Jews for certain religious referents play an important role in the construction of intra-Jewish difference.

Another important finding of the word option items was that people do report using different words for different audiences, as Tables 8 and 9 indicate. This trend suggests active control over these linguistic variants. People are tailoring the Jewishness of their speech to their audience: they use different words and pronunciations when they speak to non-Jews and to Jews who are or are not engaged in religious life. In the comments section some Jews indicated other distinctions, as well. Some reported using Israeli pronunciations when speaking to Israelis or Sephardi pronunciations when speaking to Sephardi Jews, and others reported using the 'wrong' pronunciation with the 'wrong' audience, such as *Shabbat shalom* to Orthodox Jews and 'Good Shabbos' to non-Orthodox Jews. This manipulation of linguistic variants allows individuals to indicate that they are similar to and/or different from their interlocutors. Jews play with language just as they play with identity.

#### 4.3. Word meanings

Many of the Yiddish loanwords used in English have changed semantically or pragmatically. In Yiddish, *shlep* is a transitive word meaning 'carry' or 'bear.' In (Jewish) English it can be transitive ('I didn't want to shlep my laptop all around town.')

<sup>9</sup> For some of these items, the odds ratio for Orthodoxy is extremely high (e.g., for *gmar cha-SEE-mah TO-vah*,  $\text{Exp}(B)$  for Orthodoxy is 6.951, meaning that Orthodoxy increases the likelihood of an individual using that pronunciation sevenfold).

**Table 7**

% use according to denomination.

	Non-Orthodox Jewish (N = 23,297)	Modern Orthodox (N = 1073)	Orthodox (N = 488)	Black Hat (N = 238)
SUK-kiss	37	47	67	73
gmar cha-SEE-ma	2	14	32	42
TO-va				

**Table 8**

Orthodox Jews: different words for 'springtime holiday' for different audiences.

Audience	Passover	PAY-sach	PEH-sach
Non-Jews	95	5	3
Jews who are not engaged in religious life	52	43	19
Jews who are engaged in religious life	8	69	19

**Table 9**

Jews who attend synagogue more than monthly: different words for 'Jewish house of worship' for different audiences.

Audience	Temple	Synagogue	Shul
Non-Jews	26	80	7
Jews who are not engaged in religious life	26	62	28
Jews who are engaged in religious life	19	28	74

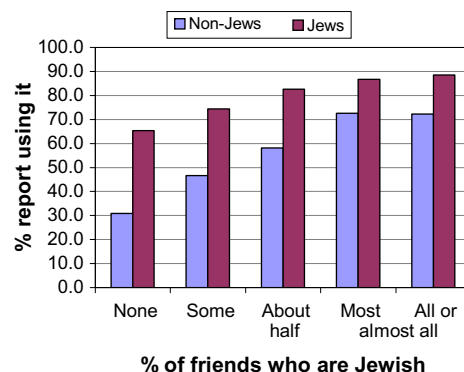
or intransitive ('For this I shlepped all the way to the Valley?!?'). In Yiddish the word *tish* means 'table' and can also mean 'celebration, usually around a table, usually centered around a groom or a Hasidic rebbe.' In (Jewish) English it generally only has the latter meaning.

When we look at what people think loanwords mean and how they use them we often find correlations with social variables. The word *shmooze* is a prime example. In Yiddish it means 'chat' or 'shoot the breeze.' In (Jewish) English it has several possible meanings. In addition to 'chat' ('We stayed up 'til 2am just shmoozing'), it is also used as 'network' ('There were lots of big-wigs there. It was a great opportunity to shmooze.'). And in addition to its original intransitive usage, it can also be transitive, meaning 'kiss up to [somebody]' ('He spent the whole party shmoozing the vice presidents'). Finally, it has become a particle verb: 'shmooze up,' meaning 'chat up' ('He spent the whole party shmoozing up the vice presidents').

We asked about these four uses of 'shmooze' in the survey, hypothesizing that the original 'chat' meaning would be more common among Jews, especially Orthodox Jews, older Jews, and Jews who have more Jewish friends; and that the innovative meanings would be more common among others. These hypotheses were confirmed, as Figs. 2–4 indicate.

These differences are not merely a matter of who knows which meaning. For each meaning, we asked respondents if they know it and if they use it. The results for these two questions were quite divergent. For example, over twice as many Jews report knowing the 'kiss up' meaning (64%) than using it (31%).

We see similar results for *chutzpah*: Jews and those with more Jewish friends are much more likely to use it for negative evaluation ('audacity'), rather than positive ('guts'). And more people are aware of the alternative meanings than actually use

**Fig. 2.** Respondents who use *shmooze* to mean 'chat.'



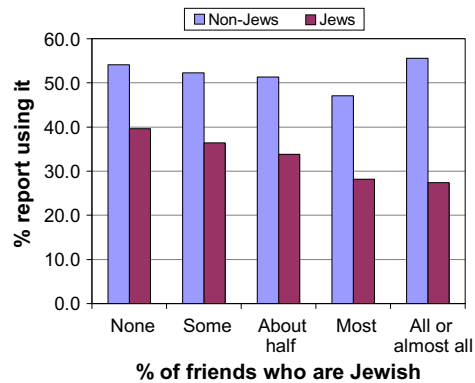


Fig. 3. Respondents who use *shmooze* to mean 'kiss up.'

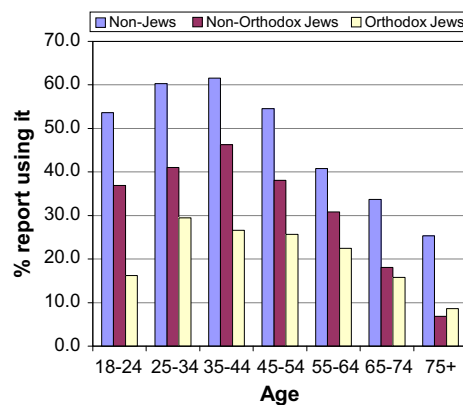


Fig. 4. Respondents who use *shmooze* to mean 'kiss up.'

them. Using Yiddish loanwords with distinctive meanings is yet another resource Jews (and non-Jews) have as they align themselves with some people and distinguish themselves from others.

#### 4.4. Yiddish-influenced syntactic constructions

While loanwords are the most salient feature of the distinctive Jewish repertoire, they are not the only remnant of language contact. There are several distinctive grammatical constructions that are likely influences from Yiddish. The survey results indicate that several of these are used more by Jews, especially Orthodox Jews (Table 10).

According to regression analyses, these constructions are predicted by the religious factors: Orthodoxy, Shabbat, and Aramaic are all significant. Orthodox Jews may be more likely to have contact with Yiddish speakers, as the post-World War II wave of Yiddish-speaking immigrants was in large part Orthodox, and some insular Orthodox communities still use Yiddish today (Isaacs, 1999; Fader, 2007).

In addition to the religious factors, Jews are also more likely to use the first three phrases if they have Yiddish-speaking ancestors and if they have lived in New York. In fact, for 'coming to us,' New York has an even stronger effect than Orthodoxy. This may be related to the prevalence of Orthodox Jews in New York, or it may be a remnant of immigrant English from

Table 10

Constructions used more by Orthodox Jews.

Survey item	Gloss	Yiddish correlate	Orthodox use (N = 1811) (%)	Non-Orthodox use (N = 23,460) (%)	Non-Jewish use (N = 4842) (%)
'Are you coming to us for dinner?'	to our place	<i>tsu undz</i>	69	32	7
'She's staying by us'	at our place	<i>bay undz</i>	53	21	9
'She has what to say'	has something to say	<i>hot vos tsu zogn</i>	26	11	7
'What do we learn out from this?'	learn, derive	<i>oyslernen</i>	26	6	4

generations past that is currently associated with New York identity. This is related to Feinstein's (1980) finding about the relationship between New Yorkness and Jewishness in the use of topicalization.

Another interesting result is that age-generation (negative) is selected as a significant factor: younger Jews are *more* likely than older Jews to use all of these constructions. Because the constructions probably originate from Yiddish-speaking immigrants learning English, we might expect the opposite: that children of Yiddish speakers would use them, and a generation or two later they would disappear. This unexpected result indicates the importance of phrases like these in the construction of Orthodox Jewish identity in the 21st century. The Yiddish-influenced 'by' and 'to' are so prevalent in Orthodox communities that they are even picked up by newly Orthodox Jews as they integrate into Orthodox communities (Benor, 2004a). As we can see from the wide age distribution in Table 11, it is likely that these features have only recently become a common element of the Orthodox linguistic repertoire. If this trend continues, then most Orthodox Jews will eventually say 'We're eating lunch by them' rather than 'We're eating lunch at their place.'

Do Jews associate these phrases with Jewish identity or some subset thereof? While the survey did not test for this directly, it does offer some relevant evidence. Many Jews (both Orthodox and non-Orthodox) report that they know the phrases but do not use them (Table 12). The fact that so many Jews are familiar with this construction but do not use it suggests that they associate it with a certain type of Jew that they do not wish to align themselves with – perhaps Orthodox, perhaps immigrants. Jews are aware of certain features in the distinctively Jewish linguistic repertoire, and they selectively make use of those features as they locate themselves within a complex Jewish landscape.

#### 4.5. 'Aggressive' speech style

Research has suggested that Jews, especially New York Jews, have a more aggressive discourse style than others, frequently arguing and overlapping with their interlocutors and allowing for less silence between turns (Tannen, 1981; Schiffrin, 1984). The survey examined aggressiveness by asking, 'Have you ever been told that you interrupt too much or that your speech style is too aggressive?' Jews are slightly more likely than non-Jews to answer 'Many times' or 'Some times' (Table 13).

It is possible that these differences are based on where the Jews and non-Jews are from. If we divide the population by whether they have lived in New York, we see a more nuanced pattern (Table 14). Among Jews, New Yorkers are slightly more likely to report aggressive speech than non-New Yorkers ( $p < .001$ ). Among people who grew up in New York, Jews are

**Table 11**

Reported use of 'She's staying by us' among Orthodox Jews according to age.

Age	% use	N
18–24	75	191
25–34	64	360
35–44	55	239
45–54	56	357
55–64	48	402
65–74	26	182
75+	12	68

**Table 12**

% responses for 'She's staying by us.'

	I've never heard it	I've heard it but don't use it	I use it at least occasionally	N
Non-Orthodox Jews	18	61	21	22,700
Orthodox	3	44	53	1805

**Table 13**

% who report they have been told 'some times' or 'many times' that their speech style is too aggressive.

	%	N
Jewish	47	25,088
Not Jewish	36	4865

$p < .001$ .<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>  $p$  values are based on Chi-square tests ( $df = 1$ ). Statistical tests would be more meaningful in a random sample, but I offer them here for curious readers.

**Table 14**

% who report they have been told 'some times' or 'many times' that their speech style is too aggressive.

	Jews	N	Non-Jews	N
Never lived in NY	44	11,713	34	3491
Lived in NY only as an adult	47	2968	34	554
Lived in NY as a child	49	10,407	44	820

slightly more likely than non-Jews to report aggressive speech ( $p = .006$ ). And among people who did not grow up in New York, the differences between Jews and non-Jews are even wider ( $p < .001$ ). We cannot make claims about the entire population based on this non-random sample. And certainly we cannot conclude that 'aggressive speech' is solely a Jewish trait, as many non-Jews report it as well. However, this preliminary analysis offers some quantitative evidence to support the qualitative research on aggressive speech style among Jews, especially New York Jews.

#### 4.6. 'New Yorkish'

Based on previous literature, we knew that some Jews outside of New York incorporate New York regional features into their speech (Knack, 1991; Sacknowitz, 2007) and that Jewishness and New Yorkness are connected in many people's minds (Feinstein, 1980; Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, 2006, p. 190). A few survey items explored the New York–Jewish connection. We asked survey respondents, 'Have people said you sound like you're from New York?' Among people who did not grow up in New York, Jews (33%,  $N = 16,408$ ) were more than twice as likely as non-Jews (15%,  $N = 4382$ ) to say yes ( $p < .001$ ). Former Jews and those with Jewish heritage pattern more like current Jews than non-Jews.

This pattern may be explained by Jews' greater likelihood to have lived in New York as an adult or to have parents who grew up in New York. Because we have such a large data set, we are able to check sub-groups. Among those who have never lived in New York and do not have parents who grew up in New York, Jews are still more likely than non-Jews to report that people have said they sound like they are from New York: Jews: 25% ( $N = 9757$ ) and non-Jews: 11% ( $N = 3507$ ) ( $p < .001$ ).

When people say that an individual sounds like she is from New York, they could be picking up on a number of variables. Because Jewishness and New Yorkness are connected in many people's minds, they may be noticing any linguistic features associated with Jews, including Hebrew or Yiddish words or constructions or aggressive speech style. Or they might be picking up on regional phonological variants used in the New York area. The survey asked about two of these:

1. When you say 'Mary' and 'merry' in regular speech, do they sound the same or different?
2. When you say [orange, horrible, Florida], does the first vowel sound like 'ore,' 'are,' or 'Both 'ore' and 'are'?"

For #1, people from the New York area were much more likely to answer 'different,' while people from elsewhere were much more likely to answer 'the same.' For #2, people from the New York area were much more likely to answer 'are,' and people from elsewhere were much more likely to answer 'ore.' These results are in line with findings from dialect research: in most regions outside of New York, the vowels in 'Mary' and 'merry' are merged, as are the vowels in 'orange' and 'ore.'<sup>10</sup>

Among survey respondents who did not grow up in New York, Jews do use the New York variants significantly more than non-Jews. For example, 40% of Jews distinguish between 'Mary' and 'merry,' compared to 29% of non-Jews. Again, it is possible that this difference can be explained by the facts that Jews are more likely to have parents who grew up in New York and to have lived in New York as adults. However, even when we control for these factors, the difference remains (Tables 15 and 16).

Why do some people use New York pronunciations even though they have never lived in New York? Perhaps they spend time with friends or relatives from New York. Or perhaps they are – consciously or subconsciously – using these pronunciations because they sound Jewish. This might be tested with matched guise tests that ask about New Yorkness and Jewishness. In the meantime, we might consider New York pronunciation to be another linguistic resource available for the performance of Jewish identity.

#### 4.7. Non-Jews' use of Jewish language

It is clear that most of the linguistic features we tested are not used solely by Jews. Some features are used by virtually no non-Jews (22% of Jews use *yofi* ('nice'), compared to only 1% of non-Jews), and other features have a closer distribution (30% of Jews use the Yiddish-influenced phrase 'I don't know from that' [from Yiddish *visn fun dem*], compared to 19% of non-Jews). For some of the syntactic variables, non-Jews report even higher use than Jews (Table 17).

The question arises: if non-Jews use a Yiddish-origin linguistic resource, is it no longer part of the distinctively Jewish repertoire? My answer is No. If Jews use a feature more than non-Jews, or differently than non-Jews, then that feature might be seen as part of the Jewish linguistic repertoire. Even some features used more by non-Jews (such as those in Table 17) might be seen as part of the Jewish repertoire if people use them more with Jewish audiences or if they associate them with

<sup>10</sup> The current analysis ignores some regional variants, such as the realization of pre-vocalic /or/ in the Boston area.

**Table 15**

Americans who never lived in NY and whose parents did not grow up there: % who report that they pronounce 'Mary' and 'merry' differently.

Jewish	34 (N = 9127)
Not Jewish	27 (N = 3334)

$p < .001$ .

**Table 16**

Americans who never lived in NY and whose parents did not grow up there: % who report that they pronounce the 'o' in 'orange' as 'are'.<sup>a</sup>

Jewish	20 (N = 9133)
Not Jewish	9 (N = 3346)

$p < .001$ .

<sup>a</sup> Findings for 'horrible' and 'Florida' were similar.

**Table 17**

Linguistic features with greater use among non-Jews.

	Gloss	Yiddish correlate	Jews	Non-Jews
I want <i>that you should</i> see this	I want you to see this	<i>az du zolst</i>	12	13
Enough <i>already</i>	(indicates impatience)	<i>genug shoyn</i>	81	87
<i>Such a nice car</i> he drives	(syntactic fronting)	(see Feinstein, 1980; Prince, 1981)	10	14
Money, <i>shmoney</i>	(dismissive)	<i>gelt, shmelt</i>	26	39

Jewishness. To fully understand the relationship between a linguistic feature and an ethnic group, we must also study ideology through ethnographic observation, interviews, and experimental methods like matched guise tests.

## 5. Conclusion

American Jews have several distinctive social, religious, and historical traits: the mass immigration of Yiddish speakers mostly through New York about a century ago, integration into American society and heavy interaction with non-Jews, continued use of Hebrew and Aramaic texts for prayer and study (among religiously engaged Jews), and ideological connection to the State of Israel (Benor, 2009). These traits are the major sources of cultural distinction among American Jews: in music, food, clothing and other visual markers, and, of course, language. Yiddish, textual Hebrew and Aramaic, Israeli Hebrew, and New York regional speech influence the English of American Jews in syntactic, phonological, and discourse patterns and, especially, lexicon. These features comprise the distinctive linguistic repertoire of American Jews.

As the analysis above demonstrates, Jews make selective use of elements of the repertoire as they perform their identities along various continua, especially religiosity, textual learnedness, Yiddish-speaking or other ancestry, age/generation, and connection to Israel. The use of linguistic features helps Jews indicate which groups they align themselves with and which groups they distinguish themselves from. And social networks are crucial in the spread and continued use of elements of the repertoire.

It is clear that viewing 'Jewish American English' as an 'ethnolect' or 'language variety' would be a reification. Not all Jews use all (or even most) of the features of this 'ethnolect,' and non-Jews use many of them, albeit to lesser degrees. What has been called 'Jewish American English' is more appropriately analyzed as English used in conjunction with a repertoire of distinctive features (some based on use or non-use, some based on different frequencies) that Jews and others draw from as they construct their identities. The users of the quotes at the beginning of this paper are consciously or unconsciously tapping into this repertoire to index various personas or align themselves with various groups: (a) Yiddish-speaking immigrants, (b) older Jews, especially children of Yiddish-speaking immigrants, (c) Orthodox (male) yeshiva students, (d) Reform Jews, and (e) progressive Jews who are highly engaged in religious life. Despite their different orientations, all of these speakers likely have densely Jewish networks.

More generally, the group repertoire approach is helpful in understanding the relationship between language and ethnicity. Rather than debate how many distinctive features an African American must use for a linguist to consider her speech to be AAVE, we can simply understand her speech as English with the variable use of a distinctive African American repertoire. Rather than analyzing 'Chicano English' as an entity, we can view Chicanos as the unit of analysis and discuss how they make use of a distinctive Chicano linguistic repertoire. With the exception of those who maintain a heritage language in a new linguistic milieu, members of a given ethnic group in the United States should be seen as speaking American English in

conjunction with a repertoire of distinctive features, influenced by ancestral languages, regional migration patterns, and other socio-historical factors. This new approach allows us to paint a more accurate and nuanced picture of sociolinguistic variation (Benor, 2008b, 2010).

The current analysis also helps us understand the phenomenon of Jewish languages. With the important exceptions of languages that were maintained for centuries in a new language territory (Yiddish and Ladino), Jews throughout history have tended to speak the language of their current land in conjunction with a distinctive linguistic repertoire. This repertoire is generally influenced by textual Hebrew and Aramaic, a pre-migration language, and other factors, and it is maintained by the dense, multiplex, and often insular social networks that Jews have created throughout history. Elements of these distinctive Jewish repertoires have also been available to and used by some non-Jews via social and business contacts (Benor, 2008a). The current analysis suggests that Jews (and non-Jews) in the past may have used elements of their repertoires both because of and to indicate distinctions in age, learnedness, social networks, and ancestry, for example. The theoretical construct of 'group repertoire' allows us to gain a better understanding of language use among Jews and other minority groups – not only in the contemporary American milieu but also around the world and throughout history.

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