

Noun phrase word order variation in heritage Hasidic Yiddish in Israel

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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. Yiddish enjoys great prestige in these communities, where it functions as a powerful symbol of a distinct ethnic and religious identity, and speakers deliberately pass it on to their children. However, the level of Yiddish command and use varies between different Hasidic sects: In some sects, Yiddish remains the dominant language also in adulthood, whereas in other sects speakers gradually switch to the majority language (Assouline 2017: 30-34). In the communities where the majority language is dominant among adult speakers, Yiddish can be defined as a heritage language (following Polinsky 2018: 9).

The present talk focuses on Hasidic Yiddish heritage speakers in Israel. In order to study the distinct traits of their language, I compared two very similar corpora (recorded in Israel):

1. **“Heritage Yiddish speakers”** – A recording of a Hasidic “education conference” that took place in 2005 (12 hours, 8 speakers, all male educators in their 40s, 50s and 60s). Speakers come from Hebrew-dominant sects, but the conference was conducted in Yiddish.
2. **“Yiddish-dominant speakers”** – A recording of a Hasidic “education conference” that took place in 2008 (8 hours, 6 speakers, all male educators in their 40s, 50s and 60s). Speakers come from Yiddish-dominant extremist secluded groups, ideologically opposed to the use of Israeli Hebrew (Assouline 2017: 6).

A comparison of noun phrases in both corpora reveals one salient difference. Yiddish-dominant speakers always maintain the Germanic word order [modifier+noun], as in (1):

(1) *klayne kinder* ‘small children’

Heritage speakers usually maintain this word order as well, but also use the [noun+modifier] order common in Hebrew in about 10% of all NPs, as in (2):

(2) *kinder shvakhe* ‘poor students’ (lit. ‘children weak’)

Analysis of NPs with [noun+modifier] word order in the heritage Yiddish corpus suggests that one possible factor behind this change is low lexical proficiency (Montrul 2016: 48). When speakers want to use abstract or technical terms that are not easily retrievable in their Yiddish, they use Hebrew nouns and noun phrases (with [noun+modifier] order). The free use of Hebrew NPs helps speakers to compensate for their lack of lexical knowledge and enables them to deliver a professional lecture in Yiddish. This common [noun+modifier] order may be maintained even when speakers use lexical Yiddish elements. This process supports the gradual entrenchment of the [noun+modifier] order in the Yiddish of heritage speakers.

References: Assouline, D. (2017). Contact and ideology in a multilingual community: Yiddish and Hebrew among the ultra-Orthodox. Berlin: de Gruyter. Montrul, S. (2016). The acquisition of heritage languages. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Polinsky, M. (2018). Heritage languages and their speakers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.