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On Morphological Gender and Case-Marking in Hasidic Yiddish: Initial Evidence from the Stamford Hill Hasidim³

Introduction

An estimated 750,000 Hasidic Jews (Biale et al. 2018) live in different geographical locations around the world, with the largest communities located in Israel, mainly in Jerusalem's Meah Shearim neighbourhood and Bnei Brak near Tel Aviv; in the US, mainly in and around the New York City; in Antwerp, Belgium; and in London's Stamford Hill (ca. 40,000 people). There are few demographic studies of the communities, and little documentation of their use of Yiddish. The few studies that exist all point to substantial Yiddish language use: for example, Holman and Holman (2002) claim that over 75% of adults and children in London's Stamford Hill community are "fluent" in Yiddish, and over 50% use it as "the main language at home".

We have conducted the first study of the linguistic characteristics of the Yiddish spoken in the community in London's Stamford Hill. In this paper, we present our initial evidence in support of the claim that current-day Stamford Hill Hasidic Yiddish has no notion of case or gender. In this, it seems similar to the language of other Hasidic communities, as described by Krogh (2012, 2018), Assouline (2014, 2017), and Sadock and Masor (2018), although these authors interpret their findings as merely morphological syncretism. We argue for loss of the notion of morphological case and gender in the grammar of the speakers, except in the case of personal pronouns. Before we describe our findings in Stamford Hill Hasidic Yiddish spoken and written language, we begin with a brief summary of nominal case and gender in Standard Yiddish and pre-War Eastern Yiddish dialects.

Historical introduction to case and gender in Eastern Yiddish

In Eastern Yiddish, there are three geographical dialects, Northeastern, Mideastern, and Southeastern. There is also a standardised dialect called Standard Yiddish.

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Mideastern, Southeastern, and Standard Yiddish have a tripartite nominal case and gender system consisting of a masculine, feminine, and neuter gender and nominative, accusative, and dative case marking on the definite article and attributive adjectives (see Jacobs 2005 and Kahn 2016). In addition to the case markings on the definite article and adjectives, proper nouns and a small group of common nouns are marked with an accusative/dative suffix, for example טאטן דעם טאטן *dem tatn* “the.ACC/DAT father.ACC/DAT”. (Northeastern Yiddish differs somewhat from this system; see Jacobs 1990.)

While in Standard Yiddish, the case and gender system outlined above is generally rigorously adhered to, a certain amount of variation exists in the traditional spoken dialects (see Wolf 1969). For example, in some local varieties, the distinction between the accusative and dative is not always strictly maintained (U. Weinreich 2007: 333–334). Similarly, the grammatical gender of certain nouns is subject to some degree of geographical fluctuation, resulting in a situation whereby different speakers might treat a given noun as either masculine or neuter or either masculine or feminine. These phenomena do not suggest a breakdown in the gender system in the pre-War traditional dialects, rather simply regional variation in its use, with the biggest differences seen in the Northeastern dialect area (see Jacobs 1990). However, as Krogh (2012) already noted, the tendency, already present pre-War, towards a merger of the accusative and dative in the feminine in southern Poland and Hungary can be regarded as a forerunner for the more systematic loss of case and gender observed in post-War Hasidic Yiddish, discussed extensively below.

Contemporary Stamford Hill Hasidic Yiddish spoken data

We obtained spoken language data from Yiddish speakers from the Stamford Hill Hasidic community in three different ways. First, we interviewed community members using a set of questions formulated in Standard Yiddish. Second, we asked them to read and translate into Yiddish, sentence-by-sentence, some short texts and dialogues written in English. Third, we obtained some recordings of spontaneous speech between community members. In addition, after the data collection, we explicitly discussed the issue of case and gender in Yiddish with some of the participants.

Our findings show that Stamford Hill Hasidic Yiddish (i) has no productive accusative or dative case marking on full nominals except for a handful of lexically specific expressions; (ii) has no productive gender marking on full nominals with some occasional exceptions; (iii) there is case marking on pronouns, but there is some variation as to the forms used; (iv) a former gender agreement marker have been reanalysed as markers of attributive modification (see also Krogh 2018); (v) speakers are unaware of the gender of most nouns or of the morphological ‘rules’ of case marking on nominals. A representative example of each type of noun phrase is given in Table 1 below.

		<i>Masculine</i>	<i>Feminine</i>	<i>Neuter</i>	<i>Plural</i>
<i>Definite</i>	NOM	də ureme man <i>the poor man</i>	də alte fro: <i>the old woman</i>	də alte purfolk <i>the old couple</i>	di andere dray shefeləkh <i>the other three sheep.DIM</i>
	ACC	də ureme mentsh <i>the poor person</i>	də gite tsaytung <i>the good newspaper</i>	də beste flaysh <i>the best meat</i>	də royte tirən <i>the red door</i>
	DAT	mit də ziste tsimes <i>with the sweetest tsimes</i>	tsi də holtse tiə <i>to the wooden door</i>	fin də shabes esn <i>from the Sabbath food</i>	far di jidən <i>for the Jews</i>
<i>Indefinite</i>	NOM	a ureme man <i>a poor man</i>	an interesantə ma:se <i>an interesting story</i>	a kurtse leybn <i>a short life</i>	gite mentshn <i>good people</i>
	ACC	a royte meser <i>a red knife</i>	a gite besie <i>good news</i>	a naye rekl <i>a new coat</i>	alte broune shtivl <i>old brown boots</i>
	DAT	ofən lange vek <i>on the long way</i>	in a groyse mus <i>in a big size</i>	in a klayne shtetl <i>in a small shtetl (town)</i>	far kertsere kinder <i>for smaller children</i>

Table 1: Case and gender on nominal forms as elicited in spoken language from informants from the Stamford Hill Hasidic community.

The table demonstrates that there is a full breakdown of the case and gender system in the sense that the nominative forms no longer differ from the accusative or dative ones. The definite article is uniformly pronounced *də* in all of the singular noun phrases, and *də* alternates with *di* in the plural.

Adjectival agreement is equally gone. In all forms *-e* (sometimes pronounced as *-ə*) appears on the modifying adjective, irrespective of gender and case. This includes indefinite singular neuter forms, which are marked by a zero morpheme in Standard Yiddish and in the pre-War dialects. It therefore appears that the formerly common *-e* agreement marker on adjectives has been reanalysed as an attributive modification marker. As (1) shows, the marker does not show up in predicative contexts. This supports our proposal that *-e* is now a marker of attributive modification.

(1) a. Də tsimer iz klayn/*klaynə.

the room is small/small-E

‘The room is small.’

b. De man iz urem/*uremə.

the man is poor/poor-E

‘The man is poor.’

Based on the evidence we have gathered, we observe that Stamford Hill Hasidic Yiddish has lost case and gender marking. We are not the first to note this tendency in the language of Hasidic speakers. Krogh (2012: 495) studied published written data from the Satmar Hasidic community in the United States. He interprets his findings as evidence that “gender and case syncretism [...] has been generalised to the entire paradigm of determiners and to all attributive adjectives”. A similar description was put forward of Bobover Hasidic Yiddish by Sadock and Masor (2018: 104), although they “prefer to frame this as a unification of morphological forms rather than ‘uncertainty’ or ‘loss’.” See also Assouline (2014: 42) for similar suggestions on what she describes as “morphological simplifications” in the nominal declension in Israeli Hasidic Yiddish. However, we believe that the evidence from the Stamford Hill Hasidic community supports a more substantial level of change than morphological case and gender syncretism, or a unification of morphological forms or simplification of morphological paradigms. We propose that the notion of case and gender is no longer part of the mental grammar of Hasidic Yiddish speakers from the Stamford Hill community.

Contemporary Stamford Hill Hasidic Yiddish written data

Written examples of Stamford Hill Hasidic Yiddish provide an important supplement to spoken data and informants’ perceptions. While the four forms of the definite article (*der, di, dos* and *dem*) can be difficult to distinguish acoustically, especially in rapid speech, the written form(s) can provide evidence about the writer’s knowledge of case and gender. If the Standard Yiddish forms of the definite article and attributive endings are used consistently in writing, it would suggest that speakers have either implicit or explicit knowledge of the gender of nouns and the role of case, even where they do not realise these differences in spoken language. If, on the other hand, case and gender are consistently neutralised in writing, as appears to be the case in spoken language, it would suggest that all knowledge of these concepts has been lost. Between these two extremes, a number of other potential patterns might become apparent: consistent use of gender but not case, consistent use of case but not gender, or simplification of the gender or case system (e.g. use of only two genders or cases) would each suggest that speakers have more knowledge of case and/or gender than their spoken language suggests. It is important to note, however, that published written sources are likely to be overrepresenting the actual grammatical knowledge of the writer, given that, potentially, good editorial work can subsequently masquerade grammatical lapses compared to a perceived standard.

Stamford Hill is home to the *Jewish Tribune*, a weekly English-language newspaper with a section written in Yiddish. Unlike *Der Yid* and many other Yiddish-medium periodicals, which are mostly published in New York, it is produced in Stamford Hill and is therefore representative of local Yiddish use. We selected five articles over a four-month period covering a range of subjects and lengths to conduct a quan-

titative analysis of case and gender patterns in the written language. These five articles represent 1842 words of text overall, with 199 examples of noun phrases with case, gender, or number agreement. Overall, the results confirm that case and gender are not realised reliably in Stamford Hill Hasidic Yiddish, but that plural vs. singular agreement is. Here we will concentrate on case, but gender marking is equally inconsistent (see Belk, Kahn, and Szendrői *submitted* for further discussion).

Agreement patterns in the corpus corresponding to Standard Yiddish (as well as the Mideastern and Southeastern varieties) occur some of the time, but the proportion of innovative use of agreement morphology is high. In the dative, innovative forms amounted to 58% most of which were tokens of די *di* used in the dative.

Turning to the accusative, we find roughly equal numbers of nouns that would be masculine and feminine in Standard Yiddish and the pre-War varieties with both the דעם *dem* and די *di* forms, with overall usage conforming to Standard Yiddish case morphology not more than 50% in either the feminine or the masculine. Neuter forms are almost never used with neuter morphology.

About 10% of the noun phrases in the corpus with both a determiner and an agreeing adjective exhibit mixed agreement like the following:

- (2) a. ווערט געזען דער אידישע איידעם
vert gezen der idishe eydem
becomes seen the.M.NOM Jewish.FNOM/ACC son-in-law
 “the Jewish son-in-law can be seen” *Jewish Tribune* (2017b)
- b. אויף דער לינקע זייט
oyf der linke zayt
on the.M.NOM left.FNOM/ACC side
 “on the left side” *Jewish Tribune* (2017b)

We take the existence of mixed agreement patterns to be further indicative evidence of the general lack of case and gender agreement in the language, and representative of the spoken language, which rarely realises such agreement.

Overall, the written data from the *Tribune* shows that the writers have some awareness of the grammatical rules that govern case and gender assignment in the language, but they do not use them consistently. Since published texts are consciously edited, it can be instructive to consider our data in the light of explicit comments from our spoken language informants on the subject of their use of case and gender in Yiddish. All of our informants had some understanding that Yiddish uses “the der, di, dos”. Even though they almost never use any of these forms in their speech, some informants insisted that “khsidische yidish” has rules about “the der, di, dos” in writing. But, they were often unable to say what the rule was. Some thought male entities (i.e. semantically male) take *der*, females and plurals take *di*. They were less sure about *dos*. Several informants stated that they thought there was a consistent pattern, for instance in well-edited books, but that they were “unable to pick up the proper pattern.”

They claimed that they were never taught the grammatical rules, although some male informants thought that girls were taught more grammar than boys. Generally boys' education involves Yiddish as a medium to a much larger degree than girls', so this is unlikely to be true. Other speakers claimed that there are no strict rules, and more than one form of the article can be used at least for some nouns. Finally, there were also some speakers who claimed that these forms are archaic and they reflect an earlier stage of the language.

So, there is clearly a sense in which speakers are aware that different forms of determiners and adjectives should exist in their language, even if they are unaware of how to use them. Parallels may be made in this respect with native English speakers' usage and ideas about usage of *that* vs. *which* or *who* vs. *whom* (Bache and Kvistgaard Jakobsen 1980). While the spoken form of the determiner and adjectival ending are most often *də* and *-ə*, respectively, there is no written form that correlates exactly to this pronunciation. Speakers are therefore forced to choose between the forms that do exist in writing. In so doing, they are likely relying more on their familiarity with the written language than on their own intuitions about case and gender endings. Historically, written Yiddish, including written Hasidic Yiddish, has been consistent in matching agreement endings so speakers who are familiar with this body of work will have some sense, even subconsciously, that a particular adjectival ending "goes with" a particular determiner. We therefore speculate that it is familiarity with historical written Yiddish, rather than an awareness of case or gender themselves, that accounts for the high frequency of agreement matching.

We believe a similar argument can be made for the tendency for דער *der* and דעם *dem* forms to appear with nouns that would be masculine in Standard and pre-War Yiddish and די *di* forms with nouns that would be feminine in those varieties. If speakers are used to reading די קהילה *di kehile* 'the community' or דער מנהל *der menahel* 'the director', then they will be more likely to select those forms in writing, even if they do not reflect their own pronunciations. However, if this were the case, we would not expect this recall to be perfect because it does not reflect understanding of a grammatical property of the speaker's language; indeed, we find both קהילה *kehile* and מנהל *menahel* (along with a number of other nouns) appearing with both דער *der* and די *di* agreement patterns. Furthermore, most if not all speakers of Stamford Hill Hasidic Yiddish will have some familiarity with Biblical, Rabbinic, Medieval, and, to a certain extent, Modern Hebrew, all of which do have grammatical gender. In all of these forms of Hebrew, there is a general tendency for nouns ending in ה- (-/a/) or ת- (-/t/) to be feminine and other nouns to be masculine. The tendency for nouns ending in ה- (-/a/) was carried over when words were borrowed into the traditional Yiddish dialects. An awareness of these patterns in Hebrew and/or in historical written Yiddish may influence a speaker's choice of determiner in written Stamford Hill Hasidic Yiddish. However, this awareness is by no means a decisive factor as exemplified by the use of the word כותל המערבי *koysel hamarovi* "Western Wall" with a feminine

determiner even though it is a masculine word in Hebrew (as well as in the traditional and standard varieties of Yiddish).

Overall, our findings indicate that there is no clear evidence of either case or gender distinctions in written Stamford Hill Hasidic Yiddish, which is fully in line with our findings on the spoken language. However, unlike in the spoken language, plural vs. singular agreement is robustly attested. The written language is somewhat complicated by the fact that no determiner form corresponds exactly with the spoken determiner *də* and by speakers' awareness of agreement patterns in historical written Yiddish and in Hebrew. However, the existence of mixed agreement patterns and variable gender realisation of individual nouns, along with the irregular determiner and agreement forms found in all three grammatical cases, suggest that case and gender do not exist in written Stamford Hill Hasidic Yiddish any more than they do in spoken Stamford Hill Hasidic Yiddish.

Factors contributing to loss of case and gender in Stamford Hill Hasidic Yiddish

In this paper, we have provided evidence for loss of case and gender in the Yiddish spoken by Hasidic people in the Stamford Hill community. We have shown that Stamford Hill Hasidic Yiddish speakers do not use gender or case marking in their spoken language and their written language is subject to considerable and often random variation in this respect. They are unaware of the rules and are unable to produce the forms that Standard, Mideastern, and Southeastern Yiddish have. As such, their language is distinct from that of both Hasidic and non-Hasidic Yiddish speakers who learnt Yiddish before World War II. Case and gender appear to have been lost in the space of a mere 70 years. As astounding as this sounds, we in fact have data from a Hasidic native speaker of Yiddish with no gender and sporadic case marking, born in the 1960s, whose late father, born in the 1920s, produced case and gender marking completely consistent with that of Standard Yiddish in hand-written notes (Cahan 1992). Unfortunately, we are no longer in the position to study his spoken language, but one can only presume that it would not have been abundantly compliant to Standard Yiddish use, if the son has not learnt the paradigm.

Given the pervasiveness and the perhaps unprecedented rapidity of the process, we have no doubt that the reasons for this change must be multifactorial. As Krogh (2012) has noted, certain morphological and phonological characteristics of pre-War spoken Mideastern Yiddish predisposed the language for change, and in our view, the most important reason why the change that started out as morphological case syncretism has morphed into complete loss of case and gender from the mental grammar of Stamford Hill Hasidic Yiddish speakers, was the Holocaust. The Holocaust resulted in a catastrophic loss of speakers and led to the immediate disintegration of practically all of the Eastern European communities. As a result, Hasidic Yiddish has essentially developed in isolation for the past 70 years: formerly the fundamental vehicle

of Ashkenazi Jewish life and culture, it now functions as a vernacular predominantly only in Hasidic communities.

A further contributing factor to the acceleration of this process is that Hasidic speakers by and large choose not to access secular literature and nonfiction writings that are available in the language because they consider such writings too worldly for their attention. Given that the written texts provide evidence of grammatical markers of case and gender, this removes a possible source of potential for grammar preservation and counteracting language change. While pre-World War II Polish speakers may have neutralised some case distinction in their everyday speech, they would certainly have been able to apply the full case paradigm in their writing. Schooling, literature, newspapers, and other forms of culture would have organically provided knowledge of the case (and gender) system, but the Holocaust severed this tradition.

A related factor is that Yiddish does not have a high prestige in Hasidic communities in the sense that it is considered far more important to develop a sophisticated knowledge of pre-modern Hebrew and Aramaic for religious study than to better one's Yiddish linguistic skills. Also, the traditional Hasidic educational practice does not emphasise language instruction. Explicit Yiddish grammatical education in schools is limited, and editorial standards of written Yiddish publications are not strictly maintained.

Finally, just like pre-World War II Yiddish speaking communities, present-day Hasidic communities globally are marked by a considerable degree of multilingualism. Most Hasidic speakers in the Stamford Hill community or the communities in the United States are also speakers of English, Antwerp speakers predominantly also speak French and Flemish, while most Yiddish Hasidic speakers in Israel also speak Modern Hebrew. In addition, there is a very high level of cross-community marriages, mixing both former and present-day geographical variants. This multilingual existence gives rise to different degrees of code switching and borrowing (fairly high in the language of United States speakers, lower in the language of Stamford Hill Hasidic speakers). Multilingualism also raises the potential possibility of transfer of grammatical features from one language to the other (see for instance Kahn 2009, 2015 and Doron and Meir 2015 on transfer from Yiddish to Hebrew).

Specifically, in the context of loss of case and gender marking, the question arises whether this could have been due to interaction with, or transfer from English. Given data from the Antwerp and Israeli communities suggesting that loss of case and gender has also affected the other Hasidic communities, our initial hypothesis is that this is not a very likely explanation. Modern Hebrew, French, and Flemish lack case but all have a gender. So, if transfer were the cause of the loss of case and gender in English, we would expect a differential outcome in the Yiddish of the communities in the English-speaking countries versus the Yiddish of the other communities. We have no evidence available to us that supports the presence of such differential behaviour.

Moreover, as Krogh (2018) also notes, the innovative use of the *-e* modificational adjectival ending has no equivalent in English either.

The multilingual setting in which present-day Hasidic Yiddish speakers live their lives is important for a more general reason. Multilingual speakers often have different levels of language competence in their respective languages. We have certainly found evidence of high levels of variation in the competence of speakers with the Stamford Hill Hasidic community, with for instance Satmar Hasidic speakers generally having a better command of Yiddish than Gerers, and men generally having a better command of the language than women. We have also noted that there seems to be a high proportion of speakers of Yiddish in the Stamford Hill Hasidic community that are not native speakers of Yiddish, but advanced second language speakers. If this turns out to be a pervasive phenomenon, as we suspect, it could have implications for language change taking place in the sense that a large body of L2 speakers can exert a creolisation effect resulting in grammatical simplifications and other changes. In the future, we intend to study these factors more closely and hope to have a more comprehensive answer as to how and why a language can undergo such rapid and pervasive change. For now, we conclude that although a similar change is perhaps unprecedented, the sociolinguistic character of Yiddish is highly unusual and many factors have plausibly contributed to the process.

Conclusion

Our research has shown that multiple sociolinguistic and historical as well as language-internal factors seem to be at play in the substantial change that has taken place in the spoken and written Yiddish of the Stamford Hill Hasidic community since World War II. We have provided evidence that this change constitutes loss of the notion of case and gender in the mental grammar of these speakers. The loss of case and gender would suggest that the language has changed its typological character in significant ways. Not having studied systematically the language of speakers from the other Hasidic communities, we can only conjecture that this is also the case more generally. Certainly, evidence in the published works is consistent with this conjecture, as is the limited spoken data we have collected from the Antwerp, Israel and Montreal communities. We are currently in the process of collecting spoken data systematically from all the communities. If our conjecture turns out to be correct, in our view, it would make a definitive case for positing a separate variety of Yiddish, Hasidic Yiddish, which has characteristics that are substantially different from both Standard Yiddish and the pre-War spoken Yiddish dialects to warrant the distinction. If the various Yiddish-speaking communities throughout the Hasidic world consistently lack gender and case, it would demonstrate that Hasidic Yiddish has a large enough degree of uniformity to be treated as an entity worthy of recognition and further linguistic analysis.

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