

Adult Style Acquisition: Learning Strategies Among Newly Orthodox Jews

It is well known that people use linguistic variation to signal their membership in their various social groups and that they acquire new sociolinguistic repertoires as they enter new life stages (e.g., Eckert 2000). However, we know little about the process of style acquisition. What strategies do adults use to learn new ways of speaking? This paper presents ethnographic and sociolinguistic data from Jews aged 18-60 who have chosen to become Orthodox and acquired aspects of Orthodox Jewish English.

Fieldwork was conducted in 2001-2 in a Philadelphia Orthodox community where about half of the members are newcomers, known as *ba'alei teshuva* (BTs). Methods included ethnographic observations at an Orthodox outreach center, a synagogue, and many homes; interviews; and analysis of recorded speech.

When BTs are exposed to community natives (FFBs) and long-time BTs, they encounter distinct speech styles, including Hebrew and Yiddish loan words, Yiddish-influenced syntax, and quasi-chanting intonation contours. I show how BTs in the various stages of social and religious integration are exposed to new symbolic practices as they gain increased access to roles and responsibilities within the community (Lave and Wenger 1991). For example, a lecture on the evils of gossip is presented differently in the outreach center and the synagogue – one geared toward new BTs and one geared toward community veterans. An analysis shows a major difference in the same speaker's use of loan words and other distinctive features. Also, as BTs spend progressively more time with FFBs, they gain access to their home language, which sometimes includes more Yiddish influences than the language of their public lectures.

As BTs try out these new styles, they are aided by various interactions of socialization by FFBs and fellow BTs, including language instruction, translation, and correction (overt and covert). In addition, they ask questions, engage in imitation (uptake), and make efforts to teach themselves from tapes and printed materials. I present data on how BTs save face by marking their newly acquired style as foreign through humor and other means.

Some BTs have the goal of full acquisition of Orthodox Jewish English and even wish to pass as FFBs. They tend to hyperaccommodate (Yaeger-Dror 1992), using linguistic and other features more and in more contexts than FFBs. They often use untranslated loan words in conversations with non-Orthodox Jews and non-Jews, while FFBs usually mitigate the distinctness of their outsider speech. Others prefer to maintain aspects of their pre-Orthodox selves, and language is one of the strategies they use to do so. These BTs tend to avoid certain Yiddish influences and to combine Orthodox linguistic features with slang or references to pop culture, just as they combine sartorial, culinary, and musical practices from Orthodox and non-Orthodox culture.

Eckert, Penelope. 2000. *Linguistic Variation as Social Practice*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Lave, Jean and Etienne Wenger. 1991. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Yaeger-Dror, Malcah. 1993. "Linguistic Analysis of Dialect 'Correction' and Its Interaction with Cognitive Salience." *Language Variation and Change* 5. 189-224.