

Title: Minimal minimal pairs: Phonetic contrast in Unterland Yiddish vowels

Presenters: Chaya R. Nove, Ben Sadock

Abstract: Among Eastern European Yiddish dialects, the varieties spoken in the sector of the Transcarpathian region known in Yiddish as the Unterland, namely, the border area of present-day Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Ukraine, have been the least studied (Sadock & Masor, 2018; Weinreich, 1964). Scholars that did examine Unterland Yiddish (UY) classified it, along with the Yiddish of Poland, as Central Yiddish based on a number of distinctive features, including a length contrast in the peripheral vowels. These studies also found considerable variation and dialect mixing overall, a likely consequence of the area's unique geographical, political, cultural and linguistic circumstances (see e.g., Krogh, 2012; Weinreich, 1964).

The present study maps the UY vowel system in phonetic space and analyzes the acoustic correlates of the contrast in the long-short vowel pairs {/i:/, /i/} e.g., as in /zi:n/ 'son' and /zɪn/ 'sun', {/u:/, /u/} e.g., /ʃtru:f/ 'punish' and /ʃlɔf/ 'sleep,' and {/a:/, /a/} e.g., /ha:nt/ 'today' and /hant/ 'hand'. The data consist of audio segments extracted from recordings of Holocaust testimonies of twelve survivors from the Transcarpathian region of Eastern Europe, conducted on behalf of the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archives between 1996 and 1998. The audio was transcribed and segmented using an acoustic model trained on a larger Yiddish dataset. The duration and first and second formant frequencies of the vowels were then extracted using Fast Track, a new Praat plug-in, and analyzed statistically. The results show slight systematic differences in spectrum and a surprisingly weak contrast in duration, especially for the /i/ and /a/ pairs. Furthermore, regression models show a significant effect of gender, with female speakers exhibiting smaller durational differences between long-short /i/ and /a/ than males. Based on these patterns, we hypothesize that the length contrast in the pre-war Yiddish of the Transcarpathian region was undergoing change and possibly on the verge of collapse.

While vowels have long been at the center of scholarship on Yiddish phonology and vowel length is one of the primary features distinguishing between the northern and southern dialects of Eastern European Yiddish, this project is the first to analyze these vowels acoustically. In fact, Yiddish may be the sole Germanic language whose sound system has not yet been subjected to a thorough acoustic analysis (see, however, Bleaman 2018 for an analysis of stop consonants and Kleine 1998 on Standard Yiddish [g] and [ɔ]). This project thus fills an important gap in Yiddish linguistics, while also illustrating how archival recordings can be utilized to increase our understanding of understudied dialects. Moreover, the results of this study have implications for dialect classification, exposing systematic differences among the subdialects of the Central Yiddish dialect region that may have resulted from language contact and geopolitical change. Finally, this phonetic description of Unterland Yiddish can function as a baseline for examining contemporary dialects of Yiddish that derive from that region (e.g., Hasidic Yiddish of New York).

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