

## **CS 513: American Jewish Language and Identity in Historical Context**

Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion

Summer 2007

Instructor: Sarah Bunin Benor

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

Around the world, wherever Jews have lived, they have distinguished themselves linguistically from their non-Jewish neighbors. They have spoken languages as diverse as Arabic, Spanish, Persian, and Malayalam and infused them with distinctly Jewish features, such as Hebrew and Aramaic words and elements of other Jewish languages. American Jews are no exception to this linguistic trend. This class compares and contrasts “American Jewish English” with Diaspora Jewish languages throughout history, and it explores the linguistic diversity among subgroups of American Jews, especially according to denomination, Jewish education, region, ancestral origin, and orientation towards Israel.

The class will be guided by several questions, including:

- What constitutes a “Jewish language”?
- How do Jews use language to distinguish themselves from non-Jews and from other Jews?
- What role do ancestral Jewish languages play in the construction of identities among American Jews?

### **COURSE OBJECTIVES:**

Students should become familiar with:

1. the history of Jewish languages
2. common components of Jewish languages
3. characteristics of contemporary American Jews in all their diversity
4. some theories and methods of sociolinguistics (the study of the relationship between language and society)

### **PREREQUISITE:**

General familiarity with the American Jewish community.

### **REQUIRED TEXTS:**

*The Jewish Cultural Tapestry: International Jewish Folk Traditions*, by Steven M.

Lowenstein, Oxford University Press, 2002.

Course reader, available from University Readers: <http://www.universityreaders.com>

Online resource: Jewish Language Research Website: <http://www.jewish-languages.org>

### **COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING:**

This class is driven by participation. To participate fully, you must complete the reading assignments and fully absorb them before each class. Other in-class activities will include analysis of texts and speech excerpts, case studies, and debates.

1. Class participation (25%)
  - a. Quantity (is the participation frequent enough?)

- b. Quality (do the comments show understanding of and engagement with the material?)
  - c. Evidence of preparation (reading in an engaged way)
  - d. Overall contribution to the class (not overbearing, not distracted, contributes positively to the class vibe)
2. 6-8-page paper and presentation (see details below) (75%)

**CONTACT INFORMATION:**

Best way to reach me: e-mail: [sbenor@huc.edu](mailto:sbenor@huc.edu).

Office #8 in the basement. Office phone: 213-765-2124.

Office hours: by appointment (don't be shy!).

**SCHEDULE**

1. Mon 6/18, 1:15-3:00

Introduction to the class

Linguistic issues: elements of language, language vs. dialect, language contact, sociolinguistic variation, orthography

American Jewry in historical context

*Reading:*

In preparation for the class, please browse through the Jewish Language Research

Website: <http://www.jewish-languages.org/>.

2. Tues 6/19, 10:30-12:15

Diversity of the Diaspora: Jewish migration history

*Reading:*

Lowenstein, Steven M. 2000. *The Jewish Cultural Tapestry: International Jewish Folk Traditions*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1-48.

3. Thurs 6/21, 1:45-3:30

Overview of Jewish languages

*Reading:*

Spolsky, Bernard and Sarah Bunin Benor. 2006. Jewish Languages. In *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*. Keith Brown, ed. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Vol. 6. Oxford: Elsevier. 120-124.

Lowenstein, Steven M. 2000. *The Jewish Cultural Tapestry: International Jewish Folk Traditions*. New York: Oxford University Press. 229-245.

Prager, Leonard. 1986. A Preliminary Checklist of English Names of Jewish Lects. *Jewish Language Review* 6 (skim this and bring to class).

4. Tues 6/26, 10:30-12:15

Jewish English as a Jewish language

*Reading:*

Benor, Sarah Bunin. 2007. Do American Jews Speak a 'Jewish Language'? A Model of Jewish Linguistic Distinctiveness. Unpublished manuscript. 1-33.

5. Thurs 6/28, 1:45-3:30

Jewish languages compared to languages of other groups

*Reading:*

Stillman, Norman. 1991. Language Patterns in Islamic and Judaic Societies. In *Islam and Judaism: 1400 Years of Shared Values*, S. Wasserstrom, ed. Portland: Institute for Judaic Studies in the Pacific Northwest. 41-55.

Rickford, John and Russell. 2000. *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English*. New York: Wiley and Sons. 91-108, 221-229.

6. Mon 7/2, 1:15-3:00

Hebrew in American Jewish communal life and education 1

*Reading:*

Shaked, Gershon. 1993. Judaism in Translation: Thoughts on the Alexandria Hypothesis. In *Hebrew in America: Perspectives and Prospects*. Alan Mintz, ed. Detroit: Wayne State University Press. 277-295.

Glinert, Lewis. 1993. Language as Quasilect: Hebrew in Contemporary Anglo-Jewry. In *Hebrew in Ashkenaz: A Language in Exile*. New York: Oxford University Press. 249-264.

**Paper proposals due today.**

7. Thurs 7/5, 1:45-3:30

Hebrew in American Jewish communal life and education 2

*Reading:*

Lipstadt, Deborah. 1993. Hebrew among Jewish communal leaders: Requirement, elective, or extra-curricular activity? In *Hebrew in America: Perspectives and Prospects*. Alan Mintz, ed. Detroit: Wayne State University Press. 309-321.

Weinreich, Max. 1980. *History of the Yiddish Language*. Translated from Yiddish by S. Noble and J. Fishman. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 351-4.

8. Mon 7/9, 1:15-3:00

*Lashon Kodesh* (Hebrew/Aramaic) component in Jewish languages 1

*Reading:*

- Bunis, David M. 1981. A Comparative Linguistic Analysis of Judezmo and Yiddish  
*International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 30. 49-70.
- Krivoruchko, J. 2001. The Hebrew/Aramaic Component in Romaniote [Judeo-Greek]  
Dialects. *World Congress of Jewish Studies* 13. 1-8.

9. Tues 7/10, 10:30-12:15

Lashon Kodesh component in Jewish languages 2

*Reading:*

- Excerpts on Judeo-Arabic and other languages from *Vena Hebraica in Judaeorum  
Linguis: Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on the Hebrew and  
Aramaic Elements in Jewish Languages*. 1999. Shelomo Morag et al., eds. Milan:  
Centro Studi Camito-Semitici di Milano. Shelomo Morag: 3-8; Frank Alvarez-  
Pereyre: 15-37; Yitzhaq Avishur: 367-385.

10. Thurs 7/12, 1:45-3:30

Yiddish in America

*Reading:*

- Hadda, Janet. 2003. Imagining Yiddish: A Future for the Soul of Ashkenaz. *Der Pakn  
Treger* (Spring 2003). 10-19.
- Shandler, Jeffrey. 2005. Absolut Tshotchke. In *Adventures in Yiddishland:  
Postvernacular Language and Culture*. Chapter 4: 155-176.

11. Mon 7/16, 1:15-3:00

Orthodox Jews and the Yiddish-English nexus

*Reading:*

- Fader, Ayala. 2007. Reclaiming Sacred Sparks: Linguistic Syncretism and Gendered  
Language Shift among Hasidic Jews in New York. *Journal of Linguistic  
Anthropology* 17 (1). 1-22.

12. Thurs 7/19, 1:45-3:30

Ladino in America

*Reading:*

- Malinowski, Arlene. 1983. Judeo-Spanish Language-Maintenance Efforts in the United  
States. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 44. 137-151.

Weintraub, Boris. 2006. Ladino: The Sweet Language We Did Not Abandon. *Moment* April 2006. 61-64, 75.

13. Mon 7/23, 1:15-3:00

Israeli Jews in the US

*Reading:*

Kaufman, Dorit. 2000. Attrition of Hebrew in the United States: Sociolinguistic perspectives. In *Language, Identity and Immigration*. Ed. by Elite Olshtain and Gabriel Horenczyk. Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press. 173-196.

14. Tues 7/24, 10:30-12:15

Russian Jews

*Reading:*

Verschik, Anna. 2007. Jewish Russian and the Field of Ethnolect Study. *Language in Society* 36 (2). 213-232.

Markowitz, Fran. 2001. A Bat Mitzvah among Russian Jews in America. In *The Life of Judaism*. Harvey E. Goldberg, ed. Berkeley: U.C. Press. 121-135.

15. Thurs 7/26, 1:45-3:30

Regional variation: New York and the South

*Reading:*

Tannen, Deborah. 1981. New York Jewish conversational style. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 30. 133-149.

Bernstein, Cynthia. To appear. Lexical Features of Jewish English in the Southern United States. In *Language Variety in the South III: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*. Michael Picone and Catherine Davies, eds. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press. 1-16.

16. Mon 7/30, 1:15-3:00

American Jewish literature

*Reading:*

Loeffler, James. 2002. Neither the King's English nor the Rebbetzin's Yiddish: Yinglish Literature in America. In *American Babel: Literatures of the United States from Abnaki to Zuni*, Marc Shell, ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. (18 pp.)

Horn, Dara. 2006. The Future of Yiddish -- in English: Field Notes from the New Ashkenaz. *Jewish Quarterly Review* 96 (4). 471-480.

17. Tues 7/31, 10:30-12:15

Jewish names

*Reading:*

Lowenstein, Steven M. 2000. *The Jewish Cultural Tapestry: International Jewish Folk Traditions*. New York: Oxford University Press. 69-83.

18. Tues 8/7, 10:30-12:15

**Presentations**

**Paper due August 8 either by hard copy or by e-mail**

### **PAPER AND PRESENTATION**

The assignment is to conduct a mini-research project about language among American Jews and report on it in an 6-8-page paper and a presentation to the class. Each student will select his/her own research topic and submit a 1-page proposal by July 2.

Suggested topics:

1. Analysis of written language: newspapers, websites, or literature
  - a. How has one Anglo Jewish newspaper's use of a particular Yiddish word (e.g., shul, daven, shmooze) changed in the past 20 years?
  - b. How do Jewish communal organizations of a particular type (e.g., social service, Israel advocacy, social justice) use Hebrew/Yiddish words in their naming of programs, giving opportunities, etc.?
  - c. What role do Jewish linguistic features play in advertising in Anglo-Jewish newspapers?
  - d. How does the use of distinctive Jewish language compare in two novels or short stories (e.g., Philip Roth and Allegra Goodman)?
  - e. What roles do Hebrew orthography / transliteration play in a particular domain of American Jewish life (e.g., religious school text books, synagogue gift shops, Hillel, Chabad)?
  - f. How has the use of Hebrew words changed in Jewish children's literature in the last thirty years (e.g., in four books by the same publisher or four books for similar audiences)?
2. Analysis of recorded language
  - a. How does use of Jewish linguistic features differ in parodies of American songs by two artists (e.g., Shlock Rock and Mickey Katz; Seymour Rexite and Country Yossi)?
  - b. How does use of Jewish linguistic features differ in the original songs of two American Jewish singers (e.g., Abie Rotenberg – Orthodox – and Rick Recht – Reform).
  - c. What role does distinctive Jewish language play in two American films of different eras?

3. Observation of spoken language
  - a. How do members of a particular community of practice (e.g., HUC rabbinical students, members of a Persian synagogue, secular humanists, renewal Jews, GLBT Jews, AIPAC volunteers, or Black Israelites) pronounce Hebrew words?
  - b. What roles do English and immigrant languages play in a central meeting place for a group of Jewish immigrants (e.g., Russian Jewish community center, Persian Jewish market, Isareli café)?
  - c. What words are used for Jewish concepts (e.g., Sabbath, Shabbat, Shabbos; Passover, Pesach, Peysach; kosher certification, hashgacha) in a situation where the speaker is not familiar with the addressees' level of Jewish knowledge (e.g., guest speaker at a synagogue service, clerk at a kosher market, Hillel office staff, Chabad rebbetzin)?
  - d. Comparison of chevruta study sessions for HUC and UJ rabbinical students: How much do they translate the Hebrew/Aramaic text? Which Hebrew/Aramaic words do they use in their discussions about the text? How do they pronounce Hebrew/Aramaic words? What other distinctively Jewish linguistic features do they use?
4. Extended interview with individual(s) about language use
  - a. A Jewish immigrant (e.g., from Iran, Russia, Mexico, Argentina, Morocco, Syria, Ethiopia, Turkey) who learned English as an adult: In his native land, how did his language differ from that of his non-Jewish neighbors? What Hebrew words did he use in his everyday speech? How did he refer to particular things (e.g., Passover, matzah, hametz, seder plate, Elijah's cup; non-Jews, church/mosque, Jesus/Muhammad)? Now that he is in America, to what extent does he use his native language and its specifically Jewish features? Record short excerpt of Jewish-related speech or singing in his native language (e.g., some proverbs, folktale, Ehad Mi Yodea, children's song about Purim/Chanukah, translation of first few verses of Genesis...)
  - b. A 2<sup>nd</sup>-generation American Jew: What role does her ancestral language (e.g., Persian, Ladino, Russian, Yiddish, Israeli Hebrew) play in her life? Did she grow up speaking it? Has she studied it? To what extent does she use it for communication with relatives and friends?
  - c. A pluralistic Jewish day school principal: How are decisions about language use made in the school? Why is Hebrew instruction important for their students? Is there a policy/preference about Hebrew words used in English speech / writing (use or non-use, pronunciation, orthography)?
  - d. Two non-Jewish employees of a Jewish organization: What have they noticed about language use among the Jews they work with? Have they encountered any difficulties in their job due to language? Has their organization provided training about Jewish lingo? To what extent do they feel comfortable using Hebrew and Yiddish words in their English speech/writing?

Papers should include the following:

- Discussion of research questions, relation to previous literature on Jewish languages

- Background information about the particular group/institution/artist you are reporting on (e.g., immigration history, institutional history and relationship to similar institutions, artistic influences)
- (Methodology)
- Findings
- Conclusion, including something about how American Jewish language relates to Jewish languages of the past (e.g., comparison to a similar phenomenon in Yiddish or Ladino, greater importance of the previous Jewish language component, spread of Jewish language to non-Jews)

Papers will be graded using this rubric:

- a. Quality of original research
- b. Understanding of Jewish languages
- c. Understanding of contemporary American Jews
- d. Structure, writing
- e. Incorporation of previous literature