Jewish English Among Adjacencies of Non-Jews in Middle America

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Introduction

Benor (2021) explores new findings on uses of Jewish language among non-Jewish Americans. She attributes knowledge and usage of features such as Yiddish loanwords and Yiddish-influenced grammar predominantly to social networks. In addition, she assumed meanings of loanwords change when used enough by a non-Jewish mainstream. A majority of Benor's 40,000 survey respondents identified as being predominantly adjacent to Jews, meaning having some personal contact with Jews or living in densely Jewish areas. My question is, how might these results differ when the target group is not just non-Jews in general, but nonadjacent non-Jews? When socialization is absent, how do they know and use Jewish language differently, if at all?

Objective

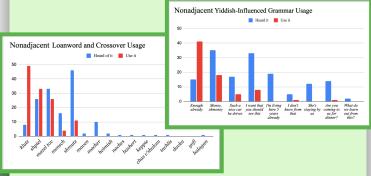
The aim of this study is to survey Americans nonadjacent to Jews for their knowledge and usage of Jewish-influenced features in English. If the results support the hypothesis that these non-Jews know and use features differently than adjacent non-Jews, then the implication is that it is necessary to distinguish non-Jewish Americans based on adjacency when further studying this area.

Method

A survey was distributed via snowball sampling (Dusek et al. 2015:281) and yielded a total of 105 responses. The survey was split into four parts. The first prompted for background information such as self-assessing adjacency and engagement(s) with Jewish language. The second part tested the recognition of specific Jewish words, i.e. Yiddish and Hebrew loanwords and cross-over (Benor 2010:144), as well as Yiddish-influenced grammar and syntax. The third part tested positive or negative associations with the loanword *chutzpah*, and the fourth part surveyed respondents' motivations for using Jewish language.

Results

- 1. 86 of 105 participants grew up and currently live in non-coastal states. Respondents were categorized as follows: 61 nonadjacent (N-ADJ), 16 semi-adjacent (S-ADJ), and 16 adjacent (ADJ) non-Jews, in addition to 12 Jews who participated. Participants were asked to respond to 9 options regarding modes of engagement with Jewish language. The most frequent response for ADJs (30%) was 'having Jewish friends'. S-ADJs (34%) and N-ADJs (47%) responded that 'shows and movies' were their predominant modes of engagement.
- 2. In the lexical and grammatical portion of the survey, respondents could select 'Heard of it', 'Use it', or 'Never heard of it'. Results demonstrated that words and phrases such as *klutz* and *enough already* are well integrated into mainstream English while others are not (Figures 1 and 2).



Figures 1 and 2. How nonadjacent, non-Jewish respondents self-assessed to have heard and/or use Jewish loanwords, crossover, and grammar.

Results (cont.)

- 3. Respondents were asked to describe the sense of the word *chutzpah* that they were most familiar with: the positive sense as in 'guts' or the negative sense as in 'audacity'. 47 out of 61 N-ADJs claimed to more often hear or use the positive sense, which is not the sense original to the word's etymological origin in Hebrew as 'insolent' or 'impudent' (OED s.v. chutzpah, n.).
- 4. N-ADJs claimed to use Jewish language most often 'in humorous contexts to add comedic effect', followed by 'when exclaiming something':

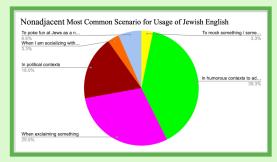


Figure 3. The scenarios most common for nonadjacent non-Jews to use Jewish English.

Discussion

Knowledge and usage of Jewish language among nonadjacent non-Jews is less extensive than Benor's data would suggest (c.f. Figures 1 and 2). Whereas adjacent respondents mainly know and use features of Jewish English in the context of socializing with other Jews, nonadjacent respondents mostly know features from media sources and use them in humorous and exclamatory contexts. Benor suggests that having contact with Jews is the main factor contributing to non-Jewish usage of Jewish language. However, this would require that speakers have access to such social networks, which is not the case for those nonadjacent. My results do concur with Benor's suggestion that the sense of *chutzpah* seems to be in flux from more negative to more positive, a change initiated by mainstream usage of the positive sense.

Conclusion

Jewish linguistic influence on mainstream American English is extensive.

Benor's (2021) study was the largest survey conducted of Jewish English yet, and gave insights into how non-Jews speak 'Jewish'. However, because majority of her respondents identified as Jewish-adjacent and claimed their knowledge came from these social circles, it was hypothesized in the current study that results would be different if nonadjacent non-Jews were surveyed. The hypothesis was supported. Nonadjacent respondents use and know less Jewish language than those adjacent; they learn it via different sources, and their communicative goals are different from those adjacent. In the future, adjacency should be considered as a critical variable when considering knowledge, usage, and motivation of non-Jews in applying Jewish language.

References

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