RUSSIAN-YIDDISH: PHONETIC ASPECTS OF LANGUAGE INTERFERENCE

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ABSTRACT
In Saint-Petersburg most members of the Jewish population (according to the census data of 1989 more than 100,000 of the 5 million inhabitants) consider Russian their mother tongue. A small group originates from parts of the former Soviet Union (Ukraine, Byelorussia, Latvia, etc.) where their first language was Yiddish, but after living in Saint-Petersburg for more than 30 years all or most of their daily communication takes place in Russian. Since 1995 we have conducted interviews with representatives of this group, which were recorded on tape. The material was analyzed for language contact phenomena such as phonetic interference and code switching, but data on folklore was also gathered. The most important phonetic features studied are palatalisation and final devoicing of consonants, and sentence intonation. For these features, we found interference from Russian, which manifests itself in various degrees for different speakers, depending on their background (family origin, education, etc).

1. INTRODUCTION
Yiddish is a Germanic language which has evolved in close contact with the Slavic languages. This applies most of all to the variety of Yiddish that is at present regarded as the literary standard. Slavic influence can be found in the lexicon and (less so) grammar, but also in the phonological system of Yiddish, which combines typically Germanic and typically Slavic features. The Slavic elements have been borrowed in a context of bilingualism/multilingualism, i.e. the utmost majority of Yiddish speakers is also fluent in at least one Slavic (or other) language.

The present research is part of a larger project titled 'Voices from the Shtetl: The Past and Present of the Yiddish language in Russia', which is carried out in the framework of a Russian-Dutch research cooperation between the universities of Saint-Petersburg and Groningen. It is directly related to the project 'The Use of Acoustic Databases in the Study of Language Change' which has been financially supported by the INTAS organization in Brussels. This paper is the result of a study conducted in 1995-97, as part of the project devoted to minority languages. At the first stage, our task, as we saw it, was fairly modest, namely, to find and record the speakers of Yiddish in St. Petersburg. We did not have a great number of informants, and most of them have used Russian for everyday communication for such a long time that they are not at this moment competent speakers of Yiddish. The current sociolinguistic situation can be explained from the history of Saint-Petersburg in general and that of the Jewish community in particular. At this moment only the oldest generation of Jew has some command of Yiddish, which means that there is no longer a viable Yiddish speaking milieu. This conclusion is based on several recent interviews and recordings made in Saint-Petersburg.

2. A PILOT STUDY
We made our first recordings in the Yiddish Club in October 1995. This Club, which is organized by the Hesed-Avrain Society and the Synagogue of Saint-Petersburg, has some forty members. We spoke to a large number of members, and eventually recorded six interviews with speakers who can be viewed as typical representatives of the Saint-Petersburg Yiddish speaking community. A second series of recordings was made in February 1997 in the Saint-Petersburg Synagogue. This time we interviewed three active members of the community.

The age of our informants at both occasions ranged from 60 to 80. They belong to the generation that came to Saint-Petersburg in the 1920-30s as children. Some had Yiddish as their first language, but in contrast to their parents' generation they all have been bilingual since early childhood.

The interviews consisted of several parts. (1) The respondents were asked to speak about themselves. In this part we hoped to obtain not only biographical facts, but also some relatively spontaneous speech. Elements which can be found in all interviews are: date and place of birth, social status of the parents, terms of relationship, professional terminology, etc. (2) The informants were given a list of 56 words to translate from Russian into Yiddish. This part of the interview enabled us to obtain a first impression of the respondents' active lexicon and to make some preliminary conclusions about the speakers dialect background. (3) The informants were asked to recite a poem, sing a song, or tell a story. This part of the interview provided us with information about certain aspects of the speakers' linguistic competence beyond that tested in the first two parts. (4) Those informants who read Yiddish were given a reading passage.

3. PHONETICS AND PHONOLOGY OF STANDARD YIDDISH
Data on many aspects of Yiddish phonology and phonetics is controversial or simply unavailable in the existing descriptions of the language. All authors agree that Standard Yiddish (StaY) is based mainly on the north-eastern dialect (Lithuanian Yiddish) [4, 6, 12]. StaY does differ between /ey/ and /oy/ (standard YIVO notation), however, as do the other dialects, where the north-eastern dialect has only one, [ej]-like phoneme for both. A comparison of StaY to (standard) German and Russian shows that StaY has both Germanic and Slavic features. The most typical of these are as follows:
3.1. Vocalism. Unlike German (and some Yiddish dialects), StaY has no opposition long-short (tense-lax) in the vowel system, nor does it have front rounded vowels. In this respect StaY resembles Russian more than German, which has a considerably richer vowel phoneme inventory.

According to different scholars, the average phonetic length of the vowels is either short [7] or intermediate between long and short [12]. It has been pointed out that the vowels become lengthened under stress [8]. From the point of view of quality, they are regarded either as open [7] or intermediate between open and close [12].

In addition to five monophthongs /a, e, i, o, u/, literary Yiddish has three monophthongal falling diphthongs /ey, ay, oy/, comparable to German /aj, oj/. Phonetically, the diphthongs are similar to Russian biphonemic combinations V + [j]v.

3.2. Consonantism. A typically Slavic feature is the opposition of palatalized/non-palatalized consonants. StaY has this opposition for /l - l/ and /n - n/, several dialects have more palatalized phonemes. Many minimal pairs in for /l - l/ can be found in StaY, such as /kale/ 'bride' - /kal'ë/ 'spoilt', /mol/ 'once' - /moli/ 'moth'; real minimal pairs with /n - n/ are harder to find. Both palatal (palatalized) phonemes occur predominantly, but not exclusively, in words of Slavic origin [10]. StaY has the four affricates /hs, dz, tsh, dzh/, which is more than both German and Russian. Forms with /dz, dzh/ and many instances of /ts, tsh/ can be explained as Slavic loans (forms with /dz, dzh/ originating from Polish, Belorussian or Ukrainian rather than Russian), but at least /dz/ can also be the result of a dissimilation process in Germanic forms, cf. /undz/ 'our', German /uns/.

From the point of view of their realizations and allophonic variation, StaY consonants, when compared to German and Russian, can be characterized negatively: voiceless stops have no post-aspiration root initially (unlike German); assimilative palatalization does not occur before front vowels (unlike Russian). Apart from the opposition palatalized - unpalatalized, the StaY consonant system includes the following un-German features: uvular [x] occurs in all positions, there is no [c]; the velar nasal [N] occurs only in the sequences /ng, nk/ (phonetically [Ng, Nk]); /l/ can be realized either as coronal or uvular and does not - as in German - become vocalized after a vowel. No data is available concerning the articulatory basis of Yiddish, viz. concerning the dorsal or apical nature of coronal consonants. The nature of the opposition of stops is classed as voiced/voiceless by Weinreich [10], but this claim has yet to be supported by analysis with modern measuring equipment. The sibilants /sh, zh/ seem to be slightly more palatalized than their Russian counterparts and therefore similar to the corresponding German phonemes.

3.3 Syllable structure. StaY has syllabic [n] and (as the result of progressive assimilation of place of articulation), [n, N]; /vln, lebn, kegn/ = [vln, lebn, kegN].

Due to the many Slavic loans, StaY allows more consonant clusters than German, cf. /svale/ 'wave', /dlon/ 'palm of hand'; as a result, certain shwas in Hebraic loans could be left out, as in /vhssidish/ 'Hasidic', /dvoyre/ 'Deborah' [cf. 10].

3.4. Distribution and alternations. StaY does not have final devoicing, allowing voiced consonants both morpheme and word finally. A rule of final devoicing in older Yiddish is sometimes proposed as an explanation for the seemingly random distribution of voiced and voiceless consonants in final position [10].

3.5. Assimilation. Yiddish has both progressive and regressive assimilation of voice. Devoicing assimilation is found in forms such as /shraybst/ 'you write' with [pst], /vogshol/ 'scales' with [kš]; voicing assimilation is found, for example, in /zisvarg/ 'candies' with [sv], /shvitsbod/ 'steam bath' with [dz].

3.6. Word stress and vowel reduction. Yiddish is not uniform from the point of view of its accentuation. Stress is fixed on the first syllable of the root in words of Germanic origin; in Hebraisms, it is not fixed, in spite of an overall tendency to shift the stress to the penultimate position. The majority words of Slavic origin retain original stress, although a number of loans show a shift of stress to the first syllable [10].

No data on the phonetic correlates of stress in Yiddish is available, while that on unstressed vowels and reduction are insufficient. Yiddish has no alternations due to reduction, cf. Russian /dom, domá/ = [dom, damá], /p'at', p'at'í/ = [p'at', p'it'í]. Unstressed syllables contain a mid-central vowel similar to German schwa. Also, changes of unstressed vowels towards a more open quality have been observed [4].

4. SOCIOLINGUISTIC SITUATION IN SAINT-PETERSBURG

On the territory of the former Soviet Russian, Yiddish was once spoken in a large area. Most speakers of Yiddish lived in shtetl, small towns where the Jewish population formed a majority, and where contacts with the non-Jewish surroundings were not numerous. The situation in Saint-Petersburg was quite different: speakers of Yiddish who moved here had to acquire Russian quickly, and the use of Yiddish was limited to a few domains. At the present, the remaining speakers of Yiddish speak this language only in a few very specific situations, and most of them can no longer be considered to be fluent in their original mother tongue. Over the years, the Yiddish spoken in Saint-Petersburg has been more and more influenced by StaY, and the distance with the dialects the speakers once used for everyday communication has increased accordingly. The primary value of this new variety of Yiddish is semiotic, i.e. it is an important identity marker for its speakers. Under these specific circumstances, language contact phenomena (interference from Russian) can be expected to be different from those in other varieties of Yiddish.

5. INTERFERENCE PHENOMENA

The above survey of the sound system of StaY, compared to that of German and Russian, suggests the areas where phonetic interference (Russian-Yiddish and Yiddish-Russian) can be expected.
(a) Russian => Yiddish: palatalization of consonants before front vowels; devoicing of word final consonants; vowel reduction including [o] - [a] alternation; shortening of unstressed vowels; lengthening and diphthongization of stressed vowels; /l/ = [l] after /sh, zh/.

(b) Yiddish => Russian: retention of non-palatalized consonants before front vowels; retention of voiced consonants word finally; realization of /l/~ /l/ as [l]; palatalization of sibilants.

As all of our respondents use Russian as a first language, in which they are absolutely fluent, and Yiddish can be said to be dormant, used only for specific and limited purposes. In the variety of Yiddish spoken by our informants (native speakers who have not used Yiddish for a long time, all fluent in Russian), we found the following language contact phenomena:

5.1. Palatalization before front vowels. In Russian, palatalization of consonants that have palatalized and non-palatalized counterparts is compulsory before /i/; while before /e/ it is compulsory in words of Slavic origin, non-palatalized consonants do occur in this position relatively in Yiddish. Some proper names, and abbreviations, e.g. /polke/ 'shelf' in passages with no code switching, consonants are not palatalized on an unstressed syllable (/pr'idm'éct/). In other instances, including complete palatalization before /e/ takes place only in non-established loans (nonce loans), i.e. in Russian words retaining in pronunciation all the features typical of Russian phonology, cf. [pr'idm'éct] in /šlé predmetn zaynen geven in idish/ 'all the subjects were [taught] in Yiddish'. In this utterance, we also see another trait typical of Russian, viz. /e/ realized as [i] in an unstressed syllable (/pr'idm'éct/). In other instances, including passages with no code switching, consonants are not palatalized before /e/ even in words of Slavic origin, as in /polke/ 'shelf' in /af der ershter polke/. A special note should be made of incomplete palatalization (or fronted articulation) of the velar /k/ and /g/ before unstressed /e/ (as in /tsük'k'ær/ 'sugar', /daNk'ærn/ 'thank', /zínNk'ærn/ 'sing'); in some cases, also before stressed /e/ (/k'es/ 'cheese', /kénik/ 'king', /g'élt/ 'money').

The situation is different before /l/. Here, cases of non-palatalized, at times, exaggeratedly non-palatalized (or even velarized) pronunciation occur beside palatalized realizations (sometimes with affricatization). This takes place not only in words of Slavic origin, but also in non-code-switching (completely Yiddish) contexts. Palatalized and non-palatalized consonants may occur in one and the same word. Variation of the degree of palatalization was considerable; occasionally, cases of self-correction were observed. The amount of this particular kind of interference appears to depend at least to some degree upon the type of text: one informant showed practically no palatalization in spontaneous speech, but a considerable degree of palatalization in spontaneous speech, but a considerable degree of palatalization in word lists. Palatalization before /l/ is most frequent in /l/ (ifrî 'free', [stu'rik] 'back'), /l/ (/l'dé̄r/ 'prayer book', /rús's/ 'Russian', and /l/ (/l'zibn/ 'seven', /zíNg'ærn/ 'sing'); it is much rarer in /d/. The latter consonant is typical of the reverse (Yiddish-Russian) influence: all our respondents have /d/ in /dish/ 'Yiddish' in Russian. Incompletely palatalization (in Russian) before /l/ of other consonants and in other words is rare and confined to certain respondents.

5.2. Final devoicing. Our material shows a frequent replacement of word final voiced consonants by the respective voiceless consonants. This takes place not only in spontaneous speech or individual words that were included in the word list especially for this purpose (/briv, bord, tok, kez, oyg, shub/- letter, beard, day, cheese, eye, house), but also in reading, where one would expect the printed forms to preclude this. Only part of the informants read Yiddish, and their reading was slow and laborious. On the other hand, such reading did seem to reveal some dormant pronunciation habits, which do not manifest themselves in less concentrated spontaneous speech. In many instances, the informants realized word final voiced consonants as weak voiceless, which may be considered to be a realization intermediate between voiced and voiceless. One informant, when translating the word 'cheese', gave the form [kes], and then corrected himself, saying [kez, kez]. An other respondent let Yiddish /shtub/- 'house' and Russian /klub/- 'club' rhyme in a song, realizing both forms with a weak voiceless consonant. The two informants with the most noticeable Yiddish accent did not devolve the word final consonant in Russian /zavod/ - 'Factory'.

5.3. Vowel length and syllable structure. According to different sources, Yiddish vowels are phonetically short or half long. Our auditory analysis revealed differences in vowel duration throughout our material. In some positions, e.g. before /l/, there is a marked tendency to vowel lengthening: the form /fjor/ 'year' has a lengthened vowel in all respondents. The most conspicuous is vowel lengthening due to phrasal intonation: vowels are lengthened syntagm-finally, normally under rising intonation, especially in instances of rising intonation of the
Russian type. In the phrases /af dem gas/ 'in the street', /in a tifer na:xt/ 'in the middle of the night', for example, the last forms were realized as [ga:s] and [na:xt] respectively.

5.4. Stressed and unstressed vowels. In Russian, there is a clear difference between stressed and unstressed vowels. Stressed vowels are lengthened, which contrasts with a strong qualitative and quantitative reduction of unstressed vowels. This feature is one of the most noticeable traits of a Russian accent in non-Russian speech. As pointed out above, StaY also admits lengthening of stressed vowels, as well as some vowel reduction in unstressed positions. There is every reason to believe, however, that these features, in spite of some phonetic similarity, manifest themselves differently in the rhythmic organization of the two languages. In the speech of our respondents, segments with different degrees of interference appear alongside segments with a purely Yiddish or (in code switching contexts) purely Russian phonological pattern. Indicative of the processes that take place in Yiddish-Russian contacts are polysyllables borrowed from Russian, which show the rhythmic peculiarities of either the Russian or the Germanic type (the latter implying a relatively low amount of reduction, without substitutions of the [o] - [a] type). Thus one informant realized the form /blokáde/ with [a] in the first syllable, in accordance with the Russian rules of vowel reduction; the final /e/, however, was not reduced to [i], as it would have been in a Russian form, nor was the /d/ palatalized. The realization of the (first) unstressed /o/ as [a] in /kondúktor/ 'conductor' and /vokzál/ 'train station' suggests that, in our informants, the Russian type of stress is represented not only in contexts with code switching, but also generally in the Slavic part of the lexicon. The same may or may not apply to Germanic words (which differ considerably in their structure from originally Slavic words) and Hebraisms, whose proportion is but insignificant in Saint-Petersburg speakers of Yiddish.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In the specific historical and sociolinguistic context of Saint-Petersburg, the variety of Yiddish spoken in that area can be expected to show certain language contact phenomena (interference from Russian) as well as dialect levelling. A pilot study with a limited number of informants showed that our initial assumptions are largely correct, but a more detailed analysis of a larger corpus is needed in order to give a thorough description of the Saint-Petersburg variety of Yiddish. This description will include purely linguistic material as well as tentative explanations for the differences between this specific variety and other forms of Yiddish as spoken on the territory of the former Soviet Union.

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