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Social Predictors of Case Syncretism in New York Hasidic Yiddish

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Abstract

This is a pilot study investigating synchronic variation in New York Hasidic Yiddish (HY) object pronouns. HY is a variety that has been transmitted directly by immigrants from Eastern Europe following the second world war and is presently the everyday language of thousands of Hasidic Jews in New York and other communities around the world. In Yiddish, pronominal forms in the dative case, 'mir' (1SG) 'dir' (2SG), have historically been used in four types of syntactic constructions: 1) when the pronoun referent is the recipient of an action in a double object construction; 2) with a transitive verb that inherently selects for an object in the dative form; 3) with a dative experiencer; and 4) as the object of a preposition. Anecdotal observations suggest an innovative leveled paradigm with accusative forms 'mikh' (1SG) and 'dikh' (2SG) in all four historically dative positions. Moreover, while other Yiddish dialects have dative case marking on definite articles and attributive adjectives, spoken HY has largely lost these. With 'mir' and 'dir' as the sole remaining dative forms in in the pronominal paradigm, learners of HY have less evidence for positing dative case than do learners of other dialects. The data for this study come from an online controlled judgement experiment with 113 native HY speakers from New York. Regression analysis reveals an age effect, with younger speakers tending toward innovative dative forms, and an interaction between age and gender, with younger females innovating more extensively than males. However, sex is confounded with language dominance in this community, largely because of an educational model that supports HY-English bilingualism among girls but gives primacy to HY in the education of boys. The model also selects speakers from Hasidic neighborhoods in Rockland County as the most likely innovators. Overall, the results of this study suggest an emergent reduction in the HY case system where, for some young speakers, the distinction between the accusative and dative case forms has been lost. HY offers linguists a unique opportunity to observe the development of a post-coterritorial Yiddish dialect in a new language contact environment. This investigation into HY in its unique sociocultural context contributes to Yiddish linguistics by highlighting changes that have occurred since its arrival to the US and to general theories of language change by identifying the social factors that may be playing a role in these developments.

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Chaya R. Nove*

1 Introduction

Hasidic Yiddish is an understudied Germanic variety derived primarily from the Central Yiddish dialects spoken by Ashkenazi Jews in Eastern Europe (Krogh 2012, 2013). This paper focuses on Hasidic Yiddish as it is spoken in the New York area. It examines the variable use of first person singular (1SG) and second person singular (2SG) personal object pronouns in dative contexts with the goal of describing the social predictors of innovative syncretic case patterns.

Yiddish singular pronouns have distinct forms for nominative (NOM) accusative (ACC) and dative (DAT)-assigning contexts (except for 3SG masculine, as shown in Table 1 for the standard variety); however, this paper is only concerned with the object forms. Plural pronouns are invariant for object case and therefore not relevant to this study. In Hasidic Yiddish, case distinction has already been lost in 3SG feminine and neuter pronouns, where the surviving forms are *ir* (DAT) and *es* (ACC), respectively. Similarly, spoken Hasidic Yiddish has largely abandoned case marking on definite articles and attributive adjectives, which are standard in other dialects. Thus, 1SG and 2SG pronouns *mir* and *dir* are the sole remnants of the DAT case in this dialect of Yiddish.

Personal Object Pronouns:	1SG	2SG	3SG	FEM	NEUT
			MASC	*zi*	*es*
NOMINATIVE	*ikh*	*du*	*er*	*zi*	*es*
ACCUSATIVE	*mikh*	*dikh*	*im*	*ir*	*im*
DATIVE	*mir*	*dir*	*im*	FEM	NEUT

Table 1: Partial paradigm of Standard Yiddish personal pronouns.

During fieldwork I observed widespread variation among young Hasidic Yiddish speakers between the DAT and ACC forms in all the historically DAT positions. Drawing on responses to a survey of native Hasidic Yiddish speakers in several communities in New York, I describe the innovative use of ACC pronouns in these contexts and investigate its correlations with language-external variables including speakers' age, gender, and neighborhood where they were raised.

The following section of this paper provides sociolinguistic information relevant to this study. Section 3 describes the variable forms and discusses case syncretism in Yiddish and other Germanic dialects. Section 4 details the methods used in this study and the results obtained. The results are summarized and discussed in Section 5.

2 Sociolinguistic Context

2.1 The Speakers

More than 146,000 New Yorkers speak Yiddish, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2015 American Community Survey (Manson et al. 2017). Of these, 85% reside in or near the main Hasidic enclaves in Brooklyn (Williamsburg and Borough Park), Rockland County (Monsey, Spring Valley, and New Square), and Orange County (Kiryas Joel). Yiddish maintenance in these communities is part of a deliberate effort to preserve the traditional Hasidic lifestyle and remain distinct from secular culture. The dialect spoken by most Hasidic Jews in New York, which I refer to as Hasidic Yiddish

(HY),[1] has been transmitted without interruption by post-Holocaust immigrants from the Transcarpathian region.

2.2 Cultural and Educational Practices

Hasidic Jews distinguish themselves from other branches of Judaism via particular religious beliefs and ritual practices (for more on Hasidism, see Heilman 1992). New York is home to a number of Hasidic groups, each united around a charismatic spiritual leader and named after the latter's pre-war Eastern European ancestral town or village. Perhaps the most prominent of these is Satmar, whose name derives from Satu Mare, Romania. Although some dialectal differences reportedly exist among the various Hasidic groups (Assouline 2015, Sadock and Masor 2018), the Satmar dialect is the most widely spoken in the New York area and exerts a strong influence on other Hasidic varieties due to the group's size, as well as its strong emphasis on Yiddish maintenance (Krogh 2013, Assouline 2015). Finally, there is impressionistic evidence of variation among the different New York neighborhoods where HY is spoken, although this has not been documented.

Hasidic children are typically educated in private schools overseen by their group's spiritual leader. These gender-segregated institutions follow separate educational models for girls and boys. Girls have a dual-curriculum that allocates half of the school day to religious studies, taught in Yiddish, and the other half to secular studies, with English as the instructional medium. Yiddish literacy is taught, but only minimal emphasis is placed on prescriptive norms. English grammar, on the other hand, is taught extensively, from first grade through high school. Thus, the educational program for Hasidic girls supports HY-English bilingualism. This is not the case for boys, whose education centers almost entirely on religious studies (in Yiddish), with only one or two hours of English language instruction per day from age 7 to about 13. Moreover, boys are seldom expected to write in Yiddish, and prescriptive grammar is not part of the curriculum (Bleaman 2018). Consequently, boys and girls exhibit different patterns of language proficiency and use. Indeed, a recent sociophonetic study found more English-like patterns in the stop consonants produced by Hasidic females (Bleaman 2018). Additionally, because HY grammar instruction figures negligibly in the education of children (both girls and boys), the language is largely developing organically, without top-down pressure.

2.3 Language Contact

New York HY speakers are bilingual for the most part, but HY is acquired prior to English and remains the dominant language in many domains, especially family, community and religion. The extent of bilingualism, however, differs between the sexes, primarily due to the gendered educational models (as described above), but also because English, which is associated with the secular contemporary world, may have more covert prestige among young female speakers than Yiddish, which indexes Hasidic tradition (Fader 2007).

As a minority language under intense pressure from English, it is hardly surprising that HY is showing evidence of phonological convergence (Nove 2017, 2018b), lexical borrowing (Krogh 2014), and other structural and stylistic changes (Assouline forthcoming). Moreover, the divide between the written standard, which tends to be formal and prescriptive, and the spoken vernacular, is significant. Consequently, conservative features may be preserved in HY publications and impede the rate of change in the spoken dialect (see Krogh 2018).

Given this context, the analysis of case syncretism will focus on four social factors: age, gender, neighborhood where raised, and school attended. Age is included in an effort to assess apparent-time evidence of change. Differences in English proficiency between the sexes, driven by the educational context previously described, predicts different degrees of language transfer for male and female speakers. Specifically, given that English lacks an ACC-DAT distinction in object pronouns, the hypothesis is that females, who are more proficient in English, will exhibit more syncretism. Moreover, the role of gender in language variation is well-documented even in communities without institutionalized segregation (see e.g., Cedergren 1973, Eckert 1989, Labov 1966). Thus, gender is

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[1]My use of this term does not extend to the dialect(s) spoken by Lubavitch Hasidim. Lubavitch Yiddish is based on Northeastern Yiddish and is being variably maintained in New York-based communities. I acknowledge that this exclusion renders the term (HY) problematic, but for lack of a better alternative, I resort to it for expository purposes.

included in the analysis with the understanding that such an effect is confounded by a variety of factors and will not be easily interpretable. Neighborhood is included in order to home in on regional effects; and school, which is intended as a proxy for Hasidic group,[2] is included to evaluate the degree to which the dialects of these groups may have diverged.

3 The Variables

3.1 Case Marking in Hasidic Yiddish

In a conservative HY grammar, 1SG and 2SG object pronouns appear in the DAT form in four main types of syntactic constructions. These are described here, followed by examples:[3]

1. **Double-object.** When the pronoun referent is the recipient of an action in a sentence with two objects, the DAT form is used, as in (1).

   (1) Laye   vaazt   **mir**   a   bild.
       Laye   shows   **1SG.DAT**   a   picture
       'Laye shows **me** a picture.'

2. **Lexical dative.** Some transitive verbs (e.g., *helfn* 'help,' *danken* 'thank,' *glaybn* 'believe') inherently select for DAT objects, as in (2).

   (2) Malke   helft   **mir.**
       Malke   helps   **1SG.DAT**
       'Malke helps **me.**'

3. **Dative experiencer.** Experiencer arguments, e.g., in copular constructions, traditionally take DAT forms, as in (3).

   (3) **Mir**   iz   kalt.
       1SG.DAT   is   cold
       '**I** am cold**.**'

4. **Prepositional phrase.** All prepositions assign DAT case to their pronominal objects, as in (4).

   (4) Di   hoyzn   zenen   tsi   klayn   of   **mir.**
       these   pants   are   too   small   on   **1SG.DAT**
       'These pants are too small on **me.'**

The present research focuses on a previously undescribed phenomenon in HY, in which speakers are utilizing the ACC and DAT forms of 1SG and 2SG pronouns variably in DAT contexts. The extent to which speakers are innovating in the use of these forms may vary by generation, age, gender, neighborhood, and Hasidic group. The examples below show the non-standard use of accusative 1SG pronouns in double object construction and lexical dative contexts.

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[2]As mentioned in section 2.2, the majority of parents send their children to be educated in schools that are supervised by the Hasidic group with which they are affiliated. However, the boundaries between Hasidic groups are far from rigid. For example, there is often overlap within families, e.g., where the parents were raised in different groups. Additionally, there are many contemporary Hasidic families who do not identify at all, or do not strongly identify with a particular group and there are several "neutral" Hasidic schools in all of the neighborhoods discussed here.

[3]Yiddish examples I provided in this paper are transliterated using a modified version of the YIVO (Institute for Jewish Research) system, which is standard in the field of Yiddish linguistics. The modification consists of the transliteration of vowels to reflect the Hasidic (rather than the Standard) dialect. As in the YIVO system, the voiceless velar fricative /x/ is represented as *kh*.

(5) Laye   vaazt   **mikh**   a   bild.
    Laye   shows   **1SG.ACC**   a   picture
    'Laye shows **me** a picture.'

(6) Malke   helft   **mikh.**
    Malke   helps   **1SG.ACC**
    'Malke helps **me.**'

3.2 Syncretism in Other Yiddish Dialects

Yiddish has been undergoing reduction in its case systems for quite some time (Frakes 2017). For example, the Old Yiddish ACC-DAT distinction in 3SG masculine forms *in/im* was collapsed to *im* and 3PL *zi/in* to *zey* in all modern dialects. A more recent change posited by Jacobs (2005) and Mark (1941) is the leveling of the ACC-DAT distinction in Northeastern Yiddish (NEY), where the surviving form is the historical DAT. They provide the following examples to illustrate case syncretism in NEY, where the DAT forms *mir* and *dir* are used in place of the prescriptive *mikh* and *dikh*.

(7) Du   zest   **mir.**
    You   see   **1SG.DAT**
    'You see me.'

(8) Ikh   zey   **dir.**
    I   see   **2SG.DAT**
    'I see you.'
    (Jacobs 2005:184)

(9) Er shlogt **mir.**
    He hits   **1SG.DAT**
    'He hits me.'
    (Mark 1941:129)

Contemporary Jerusalemite Yiddish, a Hasidic dialect spoken in Jerusalem, Israel, appears to be following a similar trend to NEY for these pronominal forms, i.e., a leveling in favor of the DAT (Assouline, pers. comm.).

3.3 Loss of DAT in Germanic Language and Dialects

As pointed out by Thomason and Kaufman (1988), loss of morphological case, especially DAT, is well-documented in Germanic (and other European) languages. This is true for standard dialects but is even more common in regional dialects. For example, while standard German has largely preserved its DAT case, in many of its dialects, including some regional dialects of Low German, the ACC has replaced the DAT, a development that began as early as the 16th century (Shier 1965). German dialects spoken in the United States, including Wisconsin German, Pennsylvania German and Texas German, all show a moderate to extensive decline in the use of the DAT.

Language	Pronouns	DPs
Icelandic	✓	✓
German	✓	✓
Swedish	✓	✗
Norwegian	✗	✗
English	✗	✗
Yiddish (standard)	✓	✓
Hasidic Yiddish (conservative)	✓	✗

Table 2: Germanic languages with ACC-DAT distinction in pronouns and/or DPs.

Data from Pennsylvania German speakers in Holmes County, Ohio, provided by Van Ness (1996:9), shows evidence of ACC-DAT leveling towards the historical ACC form, similar to HY.

(10) | Ich | det | gleiche | spiele | mit | **dich.** |
|-----|-----|---------|--------|-----|-----------|
| I | would | like | to-play | with | **2SG.ACC** |

'I would like to play with you.'
(Van Ness 1996)

Van Ness describes the reduction of the Pennsylvania German case system as a recent event, and attributes it to influence from American English. Indeed, research suggests that case syncretism is positively correlated with intensive language contact and lexical borrowing (Allen 1999, Barðdal 2009). HY is comparable to Pennsylvania German in terms of origin, bilingual circumstances and sociocultural context. That is, both are said to derive from the German spoken in the Rhineland area, are minority languages in contact with American English, and are associated with socially conservative religious communities whose maintenance of the language is part of a broader ideology of traditionalism. In the following section, I describe a controlled judgment experiment intended to gauge patterns of change in case syncretism in HY.

4 Methods and Results

4.1 Controlled Judgment Task

In February of 2016, I circulated an anonymous survey online to obtain native speaker judgments about object pronoun use. The first section of the survey elicited demographic information including respondents' age, gender, neighborhood in which they were raised, language spoken in the home when they were growing up and the name of the school they attended. The stimuli in the second section consisted of 7 conversational-style utterances containing 1–4 gaps, with a multiple choice of two 1SG or 2SG pronominal forms (ACC or DAT) for each gap. Respondents were instructed to indicate which of the pronouns they would utilize in everyday speech. In all, there were 16 pronominal tokens. In a conservative Yiddish grammar, 10 of the tokens would require the historically DAT form, and 6 would take ACC (these were fillers). The sentences were designed to take pronouns of both persons (7 first and 3 second); a variety of DAT constructions (5 double-object, 4 lexical dative and 2 prepositional phrase; no dative experiencer constructions were included in the survey); 3 verb tenses (3 PRESENT; 4 PAST; 4 BASE), and 2 verb moods (6 REALIS and 5 IRREALIS).[4]

4.2 Coding

Each respondent was assigned a numerical code (1–153) reflecting the temporal order of submission. Age and gender were coded as reported. Language spoken in the home was first coded as YIDDISH, ENGLISH, HEBREW AND BILINGUAL (HY and English). These were then reduced to the binaries: YIDDISH and OTHER. Neighborhood was coded for the 4 major areas: NEW YORK, BROOKLYN (includes Williamsburg and Borough Park), ROCKLAND (includes Spring Valley, Monsey and New Square), and KIRYAS JOEL. These were then reduced to the binaries: ROCKLAND (where my fieldwork suggested innovation is most extensive) and OTHER. Information about the school attended was first coded for major schools (including Satmar, Viznitz, Pupa, Bobov, Belz, Krasna and several others) and then reduced to SATMAR, and OTHER. As mentioned in section 2.1, Satmar is the largest Hasidic group in New York and is said to be maintaining HY as a spoken language most successfully. The categories were reduced to binaries so as to facilitate statistical analyses, given the relatively small sample size for the number of independent variables.

Item responses were coded for response case: ACC-DAT; expected (conservative) case: ACC-DAT; and pronoun person: 1–2. A category was created for innovation (the dependent variable), in which a '1' was entered for each item where the response case and the expected case were different, and

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[4]Because the questionnaire contained only one or two lexicalizations per dative context (double object construction, lexical dative etc.) it is not possible to distinguish lexical effects from contextual effects and we therefore set aside consideration of these effects here.

'0' was entered where they were the same.

4.3 Respondents

A total of 153 people responded to the survey. Responses with missing demographic information were excluded, as were those who named a location other than New York State for the area in which they were raised. There remained 113 responses for analysis, 61% of them male, with an age range of 11–68 (*mean* = 32, *SD* = 11.63). 60 of the respondents were from Brooklyn, 27 from Kiryas Joel, and 20 from Rockland County. An additional 7 respondents entered 'New York' as the place where they were raised. As it is unclear whether they intended to name the state or the city, these were treated as a separate category, which was later included in OTHER.

4.4 Results

The data show extensive innovation: 33% of all responses (*n* = 1128) were in the ACC form. Of the 113 respondents, 9 exhibited categorical use of the ACC pronominal forms. They ranged in age from 11 to 30 (*mean* = 19, *SD* = 6.06).

Using the `lme4::lmer()` function (Bates et al. 2015) in *R*, a generalized linear-mixed effects model was fit for innovation, with random intercepts for item and participant. Age, gender, home language, neighborhood where raised, school, and the interaction between age and gender were included as fixed effects to test hypotheses about the correlation of these social factors. Variables were selected in a step-up procedure using likelihood ratio tests ($p <= .05$).

The model indicates that age, gender, and neighborhood where participants were raised are significant predictors of innovation in the multiple-choice items in the survey. Older participants were significantly less likely than younger ones to choose the ACC form. Male participants were also significantly less likely to innovate than their female counterparts. The model also showed a significant interaction between age and gender. Specifically, while younger females are predicted to be more innovative than males, this is reversed, albeit with a slight difference, for participants older than 44 years. To help interpret these results, the model's predictions for the effects of neighborhood and the age-gender interaction are visualized in Figures 1 and 2, respectively.

Variables	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p-value
(Intercept)	3.64	0.87	4.18	0.000
Age	-0.14	0.03	-5.61	0.000
Gender (male)	-3.04	1.14	-2.66	0.007
Neighborhood (Rockland)	1.06	0.45	2.37	0.017
Age : Gender (male)	0.07	0.04	1.99	0.045

Table 3: Estimates for effects from best-fit mixed-effects regression model of innovation across all observations (*n* = 1128).
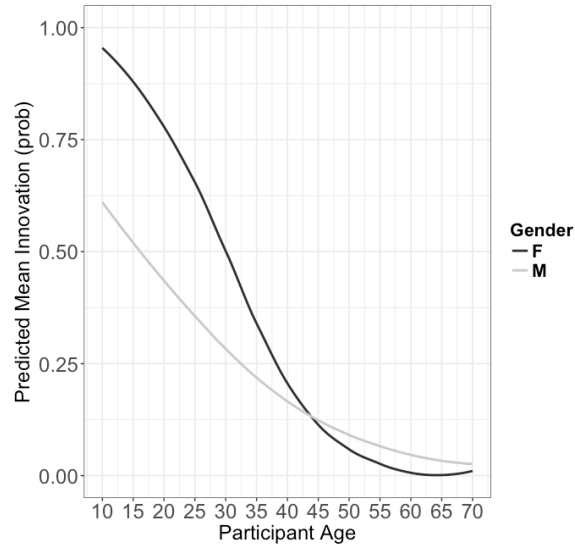
Figure 1: Model-predicted marginal means of innovation (backtransformed to probability from logit scale) by age (in 5-year intervals) and gender.
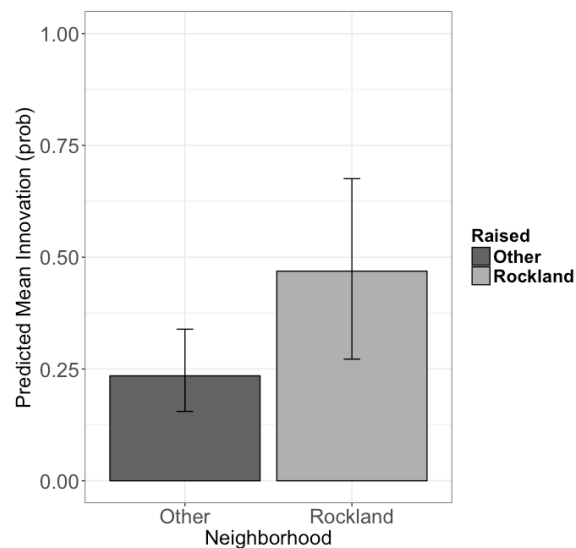

Figure 2: Model-predicted marginal means of innovation (backtransformed to probability from logit scale) by neighborhood where raised, with 95% confidence interval standard error bars.

5 Summary and Conclusion

This study utilizes an online controlled judgment experiment to investigate synchronic variation in New York HY 1SG and 2SG object pronouns in DAT contexts. The data obtained show extensive variation between the two case forms, with the conservative forms still in wider use. Given the discrepancy between the written and spoken HY styles and considering that print media still reflects the conservative use of these pronouns, I suggest that these results, obtained via a multiple-choice task, actually underrepresent the rate of innovation in spoken HY. That is, given the choice, speakers with passive knowledge of the prescriptive norms may select the conservative form even if they don't typically utilize it in speech.

Statistical modeling points to a significant effect from age with progressively more innovation by younger speakers, indicating a change in progress. Additionally, speakers raised in Rockland

County show a greater tendency for innovation than those raised in other major New York Hasidic communities. The Hasidic presence in Rockland County neighborhoods is more recent than those in Brooklyn. Furthermore, early settlers in Monsey and Spring Valley were from a mix of Hasidic backgrounds, so that these areas had more diversity than other regions, which tended to be monopolized by one or two large Hasidic groups. For example, the post-war Hasidic settlement in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn started out with a comparatively large representation of the Satmar group, and Kiryas Joel, which was founded by the Satmar rabbi in the early 1970s, is exclusively inhabited by Satmar-affiliated Hasidim. The higher rate of innovation in Rockland County may thus be the result of dialect mixing among 1) Hasidic and non-Hasidic Yiddish speakers; and 2) various Hasidic groups who were early residents of these neighborhoods.

The model also shows a significant main effect of gender, as well as an interaction between age and gender, with the distinction between the genders decreasing with age. However, as discussed in section 2, gender in this community is confounded by other factors, including bilingual proficiency and language attitudes. Thus, although the results indicating a greater tendency for innovation by female respondents are in line with classic studies showing female speakers at the forefront of change (e.g., Cedergren 1973, Eckert 1989, Labov 1966), the interpretation of this gender effect is far from obvious. Moreover, the categorical use of innovative forms by 8% of the respondents in this study, most of them younger than 25, suggests an emergent reduction in the HY case system where, for some young speakers, the distinction between the ACC and DAT case forms has been lost entirely.

Yiddish linguistics has frequently approached questions about diachronic change with an eye towards the influence of language transfer (see e.g., Weinreich 1963). Contact with English, which lacks an ACC-DAT distinction in its personal pronouns, may well account for the accelerated pace of syncretism in HY. However, reduction in the Yiddish case system is not nearly a new phenomenon. In fact, New York HY speakers inherited a dialect with ACC-DAT syncretism in all the plural pronouns, as well as the 3SG masculine forms. With the further leveling of 3SG feminine and neuter, 1SG and 2SG object pronouns became the last traces of the DAT in the pronominal paradigm, and possibly in the spoken dialect.[5] This means that learners of HY have less evidence for positing DAT case than learners of other Yiddish dialects. Thus, any account of case syncretism in HY must consider not only external pressures (i.e., language contact), but also internal factors as potential drivers of change. Future studies can examine the possible effects of phonetics (the coda consonants that distinguish between ACC and DAT forms), linguistic context (including syntactic structure), frequency (of pronominal forms), and loanword cooccurrence in the rate and direction of the change described here.

HY, which has been neglected by linguists until recently (Nove 2018a), offers a unique opportunity to observe the development of a post-coterritorial[6] Yiddish dialect in a new bilingual environment. This study contributes to Yiddish linguistics by highlighting changes that have occurred since its arrival to the U.S. and to general theories of language change by identifying some of the social factors that may be playing a role in these developments.

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[5]Although remnants of dative marking exist in definite articles, it is not clear whether these are productive or merely fossilized evidence of a previous stage of the dialect.

[6]The term 'post-coterritorial' as used by Sarah Bunin Benor refers to Jewish languages that were preserved after their local speakers migrated or shifted to another language and are thus no longer coterritorial with their non-Jewish base languages.

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