

Sociolinguistic perception of intonation in Jewish English

This study provides perceptual evidence for rise-falls being a socially meaningful feature of the Jewish English repertoire (Benor 2010), and that that social meaning is tied to a specific type of Jewish identity; namely, one associated with older, Yiddish-speaking Jews. These results provide perceptual evidence for Yaeger-Dror's (2014) call to examine religion as it relates to other facets of identity.

Previous work has found variation in the use and production of rise-fall contours in Jewish English (Burdin 2012). To explore the social meanings of these rise-falls, a matched-guise study was conducted. The stimuli were created using lists which were semi-spontaneously produced by eight talkers, balanced in a 2 x 2 x 2 design for gender, religion (Jewish or not), and age (over 40 or under 40).

These utterances were manipulated into four guises: a plateau (H* H-L%), a rise (L* L-H%), a rise-fall (L+H* !H-L%), and a rise-fall with an expanded pitch range (large rise-fall). In an online survey, participants (n = 82) heard one guise from each speaker, and were asked to rate the speaker on several factors, including Likert-scale ratings of the speaker's likely religion, place of origin, other languages the speaker might speak, and questions about the speaker's age and emotional state.

A factor analysis was conducted on the Likert-scale ratings. Factor 1, YIDDISH, included ratings for how likely it was that the speaker spoke Yiddish or Polish, and if the speaker was Jewish. Factor 2, NATIVENESS included ratings of how likely it was that the talker was a native speaker of English, and if they were born in the United States. Factor 3, NEWYORKNESS, included ratings about how likely it was that the speaker was from New York, and if the speaker was Jewish. The first and third factors provide evidence for the listeners perceiving a particular type of Jewish speaker: one who is from New York, and likely speaks Yiddish and/or Polish.

Linear mixed-effects models were built predicting these factors based on the contour guises. For Jewish listeners, the large rise-fall guise led to higher ratings for the YIDDISH factor compared to the plateau guise ($\beta = 1.4713$, $t = 2.379$). This effect was enhanced for listeners who reported significant contact with Yiddish speakers ($\beta = 0.9952$, $t = 2.180$). Speakers who had higher YIDDISH factor ratings also sounded older ($\beta = 0.048$, $t = 3.897$). Non-Jewish listeners also heard the rise guise ($\beta = 0.904$, $t = 2.962$) and the rise-fall guise ($\beta = 0.84935$, $t = 2.783$) as sounding more YIDDISH compared to the plateau; these effects were stronger for participants who reported significant contact with Yiddish speakers ($\beta = 1.035$, $t = 3.105$; $\beta = 1.056$, $t = 3.151$).

These results provide evidence that these rise-fall contours are socially meaningful, particularly for listeners, both Jewish and not, who report regular contact with Yiddish speakers. For these listeners, these rise-fall contours signal not just Jewishness, but a particular type of Jewish identity: one that is associated with older, Yiddish-speaking Jews.