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"Not really nostalgia because I didn't have it the first time":
The 'Heritage Narratives' of
Yiddish Metalinguistic Community Members

This paper investigates the genre of 'heritage narratives' among members of the Yiddish metalinguistic community. Drawing upon Zigon's (2008) research on narrative and morality as well as Briggs (1986), DeFina & Perrino (2011), and Talmy (2010), 'heritage narratives' are meaning-making devices that connect aspects of one's life story to a heritage language. I propose the model of "metalinguistic community" as a community of positioned social actors engaged primarily in discourse about language and cultural symbols tied to language. Building upon the notions of speech community (Duranti, 1997; Gumperz, 1968; Morgan, 2006), linguistic community (Silverstein, 1998), local community (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006), and discourse community (Watts, 1999), "metalinguistic community" provides a novel practice-based (Bourdieu, 1991) framework for diverse participants who experience a strong connection to a language and its speakers but may lack familiarity with them due to historical, personal, and/or communal circumstances.

The project explores how metalinguistic community members engage in "nostalgia socialization" into an imagined nationhood (Anderson, 1983) of the Jewish diaspora, demonstrating the central role of language as identity maker and marker within multilingual contexts. Based on a three-year ethnographic analysis of contemporary secular engagement with Yiddish language and culture in the United States, data was collected in California and New York in over 170 language classes, programs, lectures, and cultural events, in addition to literature, print media, and online sources. In-depth person-centered interviews (Hollan, 2001) with ten Yiddish learners and teachers reveal a continuous cycle of intentional choices and unintentional discoveries throughout the socialization process. In addition to revealing learners' age-specific language ideologies, the paper explores Yiddish learner Deborah's narratives, whose distance from and affiliation with Jewish and Yiddish heritage has shifted throughout her lifetime. Ultimately, the analysis uncovers a genre defined by individuals' mutable notions of their access to, authenticity in, and ownership of their heritage.