

Survey of American Jewish Language and Identity

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Introduction

How do American Jews speak English? Who uses Hebrew and Yiddish words and New York regional features? When using Hebrew words, who prefers Israeli pronunciations and who prefers Ashkenazic ones? Which Yiddish-origin features do some non-Jews use? To help us answer these questions, we conducted an online “viral” survey that garnered much interest from both Jews and non-Jews. This article provides our respondents and the wider reading public with a brief summary of our findings.

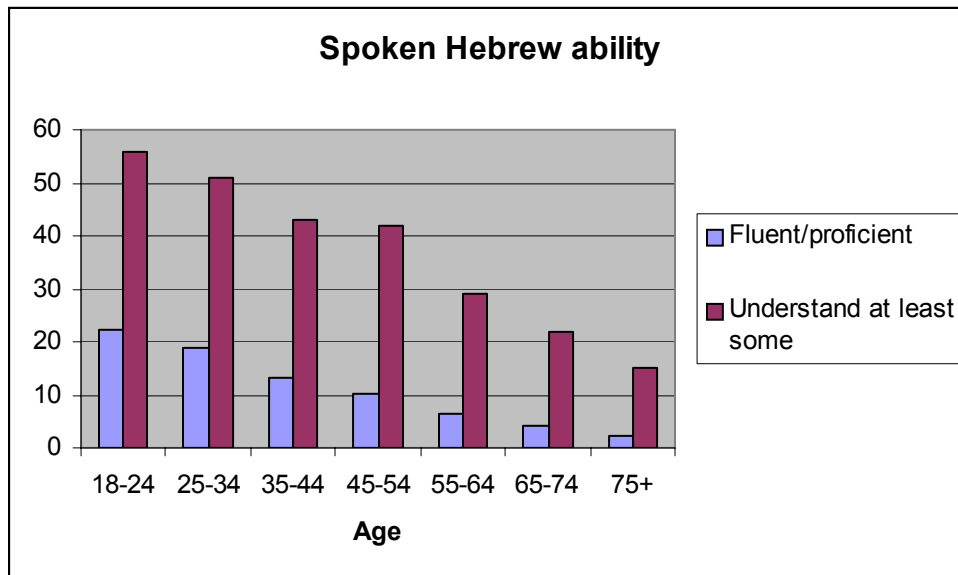
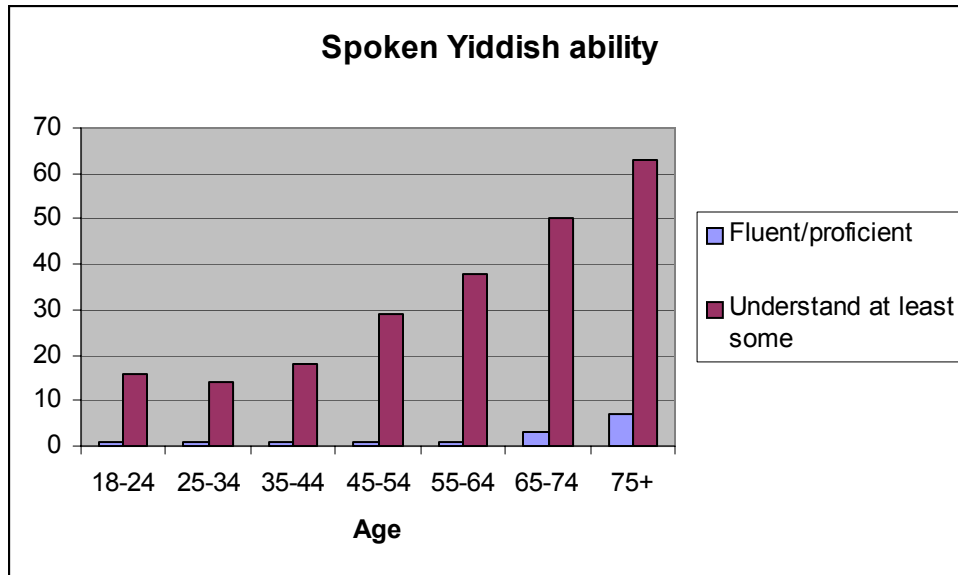
The survey yielded responses from over 40,000 people around the world. For this analysis, we limited the sample to native English speakers who grew up and currently live in the United States: 25,179 Jews and 4,874 non-Jews. Because we used the snowball sampling technique (sending e-mail and asking recipients to forward it to others), our sample is not at all random. While very diverse and relatively representative in many respects, the sample includes more women than men. More critically, based upon other surveys of American Jews, we know that it overrepresents Jews with strong Jewish engagement and social ties. And we believe the non-Jews in the sample are more likely than the general American population to have Jewish friends – a major channel by which many were invited to participate.

The results here should not be taken as strictly representative of all American Jews or, certainly, American non-Jews. However, it is possible to cautiously compare subgroups within the sample and derive what we believe are meaningful patterns and insights. Indeed, we demonstrate intriguing patterns of variation along major axes of social differentiation, such as age, religious engagement, Israel experience, Jewish friends, and region.

Language proficiency

Two foreign languages have been important to American Jews: Yiddish and Hebrew. We asked respondents to report the languages spoken by their ancestors who came to this country. As many as 90% of Jews reported Yiddish as one of their ancestral languages, and 3% selected Israeli Hebrew (large numbers selected Russian, Polish, and German, and small numbers reported Ladino/Judeo-Spanish, Arabic/Judeo-Arabic, and Farsi/Persian).

When we look at proficiency in Yiddish and Hebrew by age, we find two distinct patterns. Older Jews are more likely to know some Yiddish, and younger Jews are more likely to know some Hebrew.



These patterns are expected, given that younger Jews are farther removed from the generation of Yiddish-speaking immigrants. At the same time, they are more likely to have spent time in Israel and received a Jewish day school education. Jews who went to a Jewish day school – both Orthodox and non-Orthodox – are much more likely to report strong skills in spoken Hebrew, prayer book Hebrew, and biblical Hebrew than those who attended supplementary religious schools or had no Jewish schooling whatsoever.

Words and phrases from Yiddish, Hebrew, and Aramaic

The survey asked about dozens of words and phrases from Yiddish, Israeli Hebrew, and textual Hebrew and Aramaic. Several Yiddish-origin words and phrases – like “klutz” (clumsy person), “shpiel” (speech, pitch), “Enough already,” and “Money, shmoney” – have become part of American English; the non-Jews in our sample are just

about as likely to report using them as Jews. Then there are Yiddish words that are very common among Jews of all ages and are somewhat common among non-Jews, including “kvetch” (complain), “shmutz” (dirt), “mazel tov” (congratulations), and “mensch” (good person). The rest of the words we tested are used by many Jews and very few non-Jews and are used more by some types of Jews than others.

Several Yiddish-origin words are more common among older Jews and less common among younger Jews, suggesting that their use is diminishing within American Jewry:

Yiddish words used more by older Jews: % of Jews who report using each word

Word	age 25-34	age 65-74
heimish (cozy, homey)	32	76
macher (important person)	46	80
nu? (well?)	49	76
naches (pride, joy)	49	82
bashert (predestined match)	60	75

Words from Israeli Hebrew are used more by younger Jews and especially (and not surprisingly) by those who have spent more time in Israel:

Israeli Hebrew words used more by Jews who have spent time in Israel

Word	Spent 6 weeks or less in Israel, including no time	Spent 10 months or more in Israel
yofi (nice <Heb.)	13	75
balagan (mess, bedlam <Heb., Yid.)	11	81
yallah (let’s go <Heb., Arabic)	8	74

Finally, some words and phrases from Yiddish, Hebrew, and/or Aramaic are used much more by Jews who are highly engaged in religious life. We may contrast Jews who refrain from handling money on Shabbat, a traditional religious practice common among Orthodox Jews and some observant Jews of other persuasions, with those who do handle money on Shabbat:

Words used by Jews highly engaged in traditional religious life

Word	Jews who do handle money on Shabbat	Jews who do not handle money on Shabbat
bentsh (say Grace After Meals; bless <Yid.)	26	88
leyn (chant from the Torah <Yid.)	9	74
tachlis (practical details <Yid., Heb.)	21	65
chas v’shalom (God forbid <Yid., Heb.)	9	65
drash (sermonic commentary <Yid., Heb.)	15	64
davka (particularly, specifically <Yid., Heb., Aram.)	11	64
kal vachomer (a fortiori, all the moreso <Yid., Heb., Aram.)	3	42

moadim l'simcha (times of gladness – holiday greeting <Heb.)	4	41
l'chatchila (ab initio, before the fact <Heb.)	2	33
hameyvin yavin (the cognoscenti will understand <Heb.)	2	24
lav davka (not necessarily, actually no <Yid., Heb., Aram.)	1	18

These words are used more by Jews who are Orthodox, have stronger traditional text study skills, observe Shabbat by not handling money, attend synagogue more frequently, have lived in New York, have spent more time in Israel, have more close friends who are Jewish, and have Yiddish-speaking ancestors. When we use regression analysis to tease these factors apart, we find that the most important factors are their Shabbat observance, their Aramaic comprehension, and whether they identify as Orthodox.

Perhaps surprisingly, age also has an independent effect on most of these words: they are used MORE by younger Jews, indicating their rising importance in religious circles. This is a striking result when it comes to the Yiddish-origin words. We would expect that Jews who are younger and farther removed from the generation of Yiddish-speaking immigrants would be less likely to use Yiddish words than their grandparents. And this is the case for Yiddish words like *macher*, *naches*, and *bashert*. But Yiddish words in the religious sphere – *bentsh*, *daven*, *shul*, etc. – seem to be making a comeback. Even Jews with no Yiddish-speaking ancestors, including Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews, people whose ancestors spoke Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, and other languages, report using Yiddish words like these. Some elements of Yiddish have clearly become markers of religiosity, and they seem to spread from Yiddish-speaking Black Hat Orthodox communities to non-Orthodox religious communities.

We see similar trends for several Yiddish-influenced grammatical constructions. Orthodox Jews show quite a distinctive pattern of language use, including more Yiddish influences in their English speech:

Constructions used more by Orthodox Jews

Survey item	Meaning	Yiddish correlate	% use among Non-Orthodox	% use among Orthodox
“Are you coming <i>to us</i> for dinner?”	to our place	<i>tsu undz</i>	32	69
“She’s staying <i>by us</i> ”	at our place	<i>bay undz</i>	21	53
“She <i>has what to say</i> ”	has something to say	<i>hot vos tsu zogn</i>	11	26
“What do we <i>learn out</i> from this?”	learn, derive	<i>oyslernen</i>	6	26

Not only do Orthodox Jews display these influences more than the non-Orthodox, these phrases are more widely used among younger Orthodox Jews, suggesting the growth of linguistic distinctiveness among the Orthodox over time. Take, for example, “She’s staying by us”:

Reported use of “She’s staying by us” among Orthodox Jews according to age

Age	% use
18-24	75
25-34	64
35-44	55
45-54	56
55-64	48
65-74	26
75+	12

As Benor found in her research in Orthodox communities, distinctive words and phrases like these are so important for Orthodox identity that many *ba’alei teshuva* (newly Orthodox Jews) make a conscious effort to incorporate them into their speech, even when some people consider them to be incorrect English.

Denominational variation is not limited to Orthodox Jews; we found evidence that word choice and pronunciation vary across the denominational spectrum. Reform Jews are more likely to use English words (temple, synagogue) and Israeli Hebrew pronunciations (Shabbat, soo-COAT), while Orthodox Jews, especially those who consider themselves Black Hat, are more likely to use Yiddish words (shul, Gut Shabbos) and Ashkenazic Hebrew pronunciations (Shabbos, SUK-kiss). Reconstructionist and Conservative Jews are in between, but they tend to use Hebrew variants more than Yiddish ones:

“Jewish house of worship” (numbers are % of Jews who use each word “when speaking to Jews who are engaged in religious life”)

	Reform	Reconstructionist	Conservative	Modern Orthodox	Orthodox	Black Hat
temple	50	15	16	2	1	5
synagogue	42	44	35	10	8	8
shul	35	59	68	94	94	92

“Sabbath greeting”

	Reform	Reconstructionist	Conservative	Modern Orthodox	Orthodox	Black Hat
Shabbat shalom	71	76	68	54	41	35
Good Shabbos	38	40	45	59	63	59
Gut Shabbos	7	12	11	20	29	39

“Festival of Booths”

	Reform	Reconstructionist	Conservative	Modern Orthodox	Orthodox	Black Hat
SUK-kiss	34	26	34	47	67	73
soo-COAT	68	80	73	70	50	38

We also see an age trend in these word options. Older Jews are more likely to use the Yiddish words and Ashkenazic pronunciations; younger Jews are more likely to use the Hebrew words and Israeli pronunciations.

The choice of a word or pronunciation is complicated by the fact that individuals can use different options when speaking to different people. We found that Jews do indeed use different words and pronunciations when they speak to non-Jews and to Jews who are more or less engaged in religious life. This tendency is especially strong among Jews who attend synagogue frequently:

Jews who attend synagogue more than monthly: different words for “Jewish house of worship” for different audiences

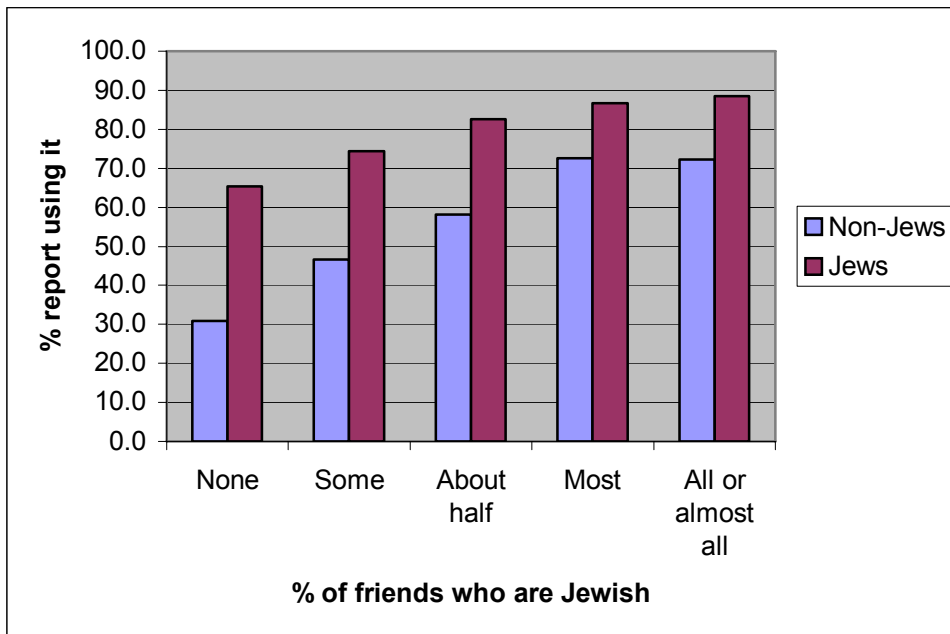
When you speak to:	temple	synagogue	shul
Non-Jews	26	80	7
Jews who are not engaged in religious life	26	62	28
Jews who are engaged in religious life	19	28	74

Even though Reform Jews are more likely than Conservative Jews to use “temple,” some Reform Jews who are highly engaged in congregational life say “synagogue” or “shul” to each other and “temple” to non-Jews and less engaged Jews. And Orthodox Jews who use “shul” with each other tend to switch to “synagogue” when speaking to outsiders. Jews are clearly aware that different people understand or expect different word options, and they tailor their speech accordingly.

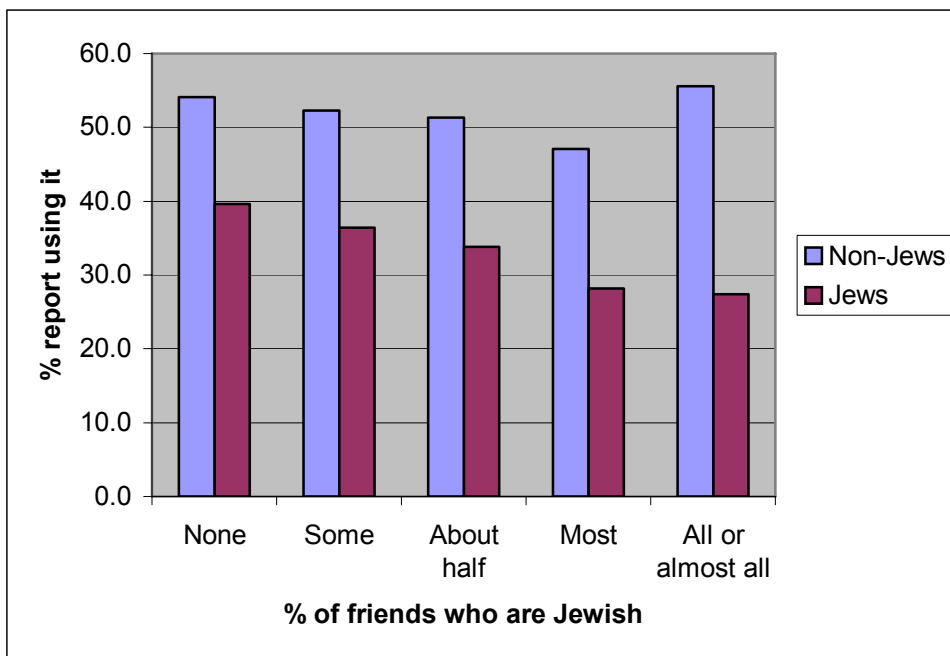
Another area of linguistic variation is how speakers understand words. When used in English, the Yiddish word “shmooze” can have several uses. In addition to its original Yiddish meaning ‘chat’ (“We stayed up ‘til 2am just shmoozing”), it is also used as ‘network’ (“There were lots of big-wigs there. It was a great opportunity to shmooze.”). And in addition to its original intransitive usage, it can also be transitive, meaning ‘kiss up to [somebody]’ (“He spent the whole party shmoozing the vice presidents”). Finally, it has become a particle verb: “shmooze up,” meaning ‘chat up’ (“He spent the whole party shmoozing up the vice presidents”).

We asked about these four uses of “shmooze” in the survey, and we found that the original ‘chat’ meaning is more common among Jews, especially Orthodox Jews, older Jews, and Jews who have more Jewish friends; the innovative meanings are more common among others:

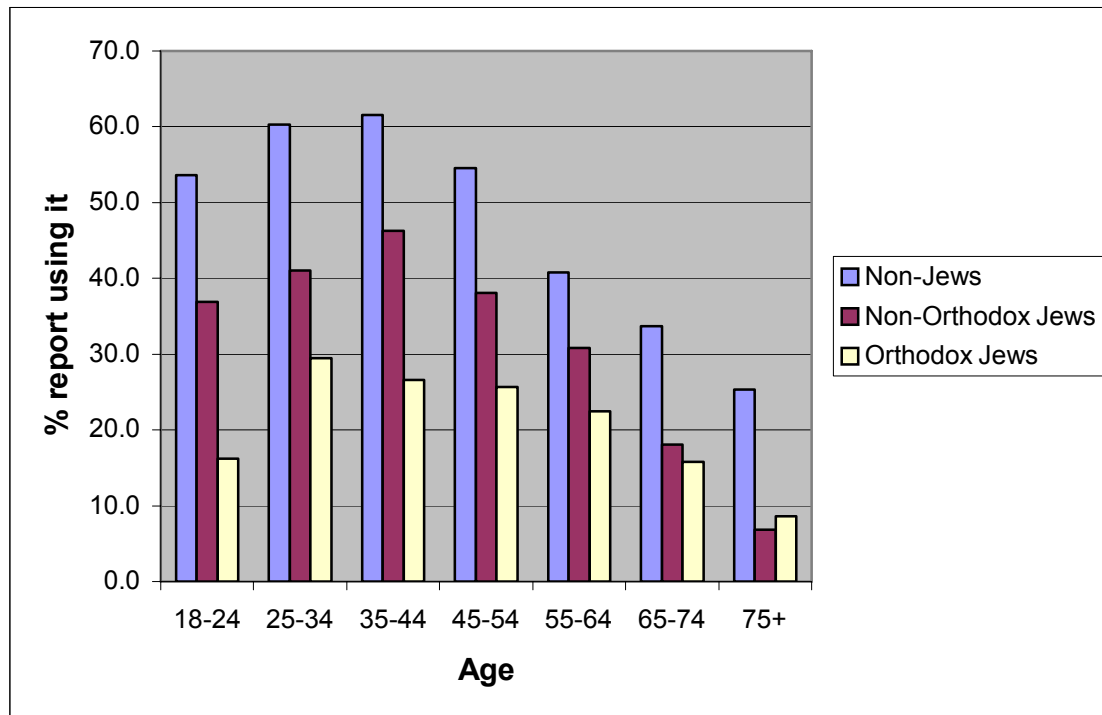
“Shmooze” meaning ‘chat’ among Jews and non-Jews by friends who are Jewish



“Shmooze” meaning ‘kiss up’ among Jews and non-Jews by friends who are Jewish



“Shmooze” meaning ‘kiss up’ among Orthodox Jews, non-Orthodox Jews, and non-Jews by age



We see similar results for *chutzpah*: Jews and those with more Jewish friends are much more likely to use it with its original Yiddish negative connotation, meaning ‘audacity’, rather than with the newer positive sense of ‘guts’.

New Yorkish

Clearly American Jews use Hebrew and Yiddish words in their English speech, and their use varies according to several factors. How else do Jews distinguish themselves linguistically? Prior research has suggested that Jews, especially New York Jews, have a more aggressive discourse style than others, frequently arguing and overlapping with their interlocutors and allowing for less silence between turns. The survey tested individuals’ self-perceptions by asking, “Have you ever been told that you interrupt too much or that your speech style is too aggressive?” Jews are more likely than non-Jews to answer “Many times” or “Some times,” although the trend is not as strong as many of those above.

% who report they have been told “some times” or “many times” that their speech style is too aggressive

Jewish	47
Not Jewish	36

The gap between Jews and non-Jews is widest among those who have never lived in New York.

Research also suggests that outside of New York, Jews are more likely than non-Jews to use elements of a New York accent. We asked survey respondents, “Have people said you sound like you’re from New York?” Among people who did not grow up in New York, Jews (33%) were more than twice as likely as non-Jews (15%) to say yes. This result could potentially be explained by Jews’ greater likelihood to have lived in New York as an adult or to have parents who grew up in New York. Among those who have never lived in New York and do not have parents who grew up in New York, Jews are still more likely than non-Jews to report that people have said they sound like they are from New York: Jews: 25% and Non-Jews: 11%.

When people say someone sounds like she is from New York, they could be picking up on a number of revealing indicators. Because Jewishness and New Yorkness are connected in many people’s minds, they may be noticing any linguistic features associated with Jews, including Hebrew or Yiddish words or constructions or aggressive speech style. Or they might be detecting regional pronunciation variants used in the New York area. We asked about two New York pronunciations in the survey:

1. When you say “Mary” and “merry” in regular speech, do they sound the same or different?
2. When you say [orange, horrible, Florida], does the first vowel sound like “ore,” “are,” or “Both ‘ore’ and ‘are’”?

We found the expected region-based variation: New Yorkers tend to pronounce “Mary” and “merry” differently, whereas respondents from most other parts of the U.S. report that these two words sound the same. In the New York area, people squeeze Fl-AH-rida AH-ranges in the morning, even if they are HAH-rible. Elsewhere, they squeeze Fl-OR-rida OR-anges, be they HOR-rible, or not (in some other areas, including Boston, these words have slightly different pronunciations).

Among respondents who did not grow up in New York, Jews do use the New York variants somewhat more than non-Jews. For example, 40% of Jews distinguish between “Mary” and “merry,” compared to 29% of non-Jews. Even when we control for whether they or their parents have lived in New York, Jews are more likely than non-Jews to use the New York pronunciations. Why do some Jews use New York pronunciations? Perhaps they spend time with friends or relatives from New York. Or perhaps they are – consciously or subconsciously – using these pronunciations because they sound Jewish.

Non-Jews’ use of “Jewish” language

It is clear that most of the linguistic features we tested are not used solely by Jews. Which non-Jews are more likely to use Yiddish- and Hebrew-origin features like “mensch,” “heimish,” and “I don’t know from that”? The answer: Those non-Jews who have more close Jewish friends, those who have worked at a Jewish organization, those who have been in a long-term relationship with a Jew, those who have lived in New York, and, to some extent, those who have more Jewish colleagues in their workplace. For example, “mazel tov” is used by 38% of non-Jews with no close Jewish friends and 87% of non-Jews with mostly close Jewish friends; the comparable numbers for “coming to us for

dinner” are 4% and 20%. When non-Jews’ social networks include Jews, distinctively Jewish language spreads.

An interesting finding relates to sexual orientation. Non-Jewish men and women who consider themselves gay or bisexual are more likely to use certain Yiddish-origin words and phrases than non-Jews who consider themselves heterosexual, including “kvetch,” “shmutz,” “shpiel,” “money, shmone,” and “chutzpah.” For example, 64% of gay and bisexual non-Jewish men use “shmutz” (dirt), compared to 50% of heterosexual non-Jewish men. This trend is not found among Jews. Why is this the case? Perhaps the gay and bisexual non-Jews in our sample are more likely to have lived in New York or to have Jewish friends or co-workers. When we use regression analysis to tease these factors apart, we find that sexual orientation is still a strong independent predictor. Our explanation is that gay culture (especially among men) includes an element of theatricality or stylization that involves the use of some Yiddish words, spread in part by female Jewish characters and caricatures, like Joan Rivers and Saturday Night Live’s Linda Richmond. Among non-Jews, the use of Yiddish words can have different social meanings than among Jews.

Baby Names and Kinship Terms

When parents choose names for their babies, they tap into the resources of English, Hebrew, and Yiddish to express something about their own identity and their aspirations for their children. To what extent do Jews use distinctively Jewish names? And how do different types of Jews differ in their name preferences? The survey explored this issue by offering eight clusters of four similar names each (determined based on observation of naming patterns, name popularity, Hebrew/non-Hebrew origin, and pretesting) and prompting: “Imagine for a moment that you were thinking of a name for your child or grandchild. For each group, please indicate how likely you would be to choose names like these.” The findings below include only respondents under age 45 (those closest to the task of selecting names for their babies). The percentages represent those who say they are “likely” or “somewhat likely” to use names like these. Name popularity is based on U.S. Social Security Administration data.

As expected, there were major differences between Jews and non-Jews:

	Jews	Non-Jews
Christopher , John, Christine, Mary (names with Christian associations)	2	47
Tyler , Dylan, Makayla, Madison (recently trendy non-Hebrew names in U.S. top 50 in 2007)	16	29
Alex , Julian, Zoe, Ella (non-Hebrew names in U.S. top 100 in 2007)	54	70
Joshua , Daniel, Sarah, Rebecca (Anglicized Hebrew names in U.S. top 10 in 1980 but not in 2007)	76	57
Jacob , Ethan, Hannah, Abigail (Anglicized Hebrew names in U.S. top 10 in 2007)	78	61
Ezra , Ari, Talia, Eliana (Hebrew names in U.S. top 600 in 2007)	54	14
Matan , Lev, Meital, Noa (exotic Hebrew names not in top 1000 in 2007)	29	2
Moyshe , Mendy, Basya, Freydie (Yiddish names not in top 1000 in 2007)	5	1

The Joshua and Jacob name clusters are popular among all Jews, and the Christopher cluster is very unpopular. In the other clusters we find strong trends among Jews according to several factors. Jews who observe Shabbat by not handling money, feel close to Israelis, are members of a minyan, and have spent more time in Israel are more likely to prefer the Ezra and Matan clusters, and others are more likely to prefer the Alex cluster:

Handle money on Shabbat?	Yes (the less traditionally religious)	No (the more traditionally religious)
Ezra, Ari, Talia, Eliana	47	86
Matan, Lev, Meital, Noa	21	65
Alex, Julian, Zoe, Ella	60	29

One set of names yielded very different responses along the continuum of Orthodoxy:

	Non-Orthodox	Modern Orthodox	Orthodox	Black Hat/Haredi
Moyshe, Mendy, Basya, and Freydie	4	6	29	59

These names and others of Yiddish origin are common in Black Hat communities. Modern Orthodox Jews tend to prefer Hebrew names, often naming children in memory of relatives with translations (e.g., Zahava for Goldie [gold], Tova for Gittel [good]). It is clear that names are an important resource for Jews to indicate intra-Jewish differences.

We also suspected that there would be trends in kinship terms. We asked “What do/will your (current or future) children call you and your spouse/partner when speaking English?” Non-Jews are more likely than Jews to say “Mother,” “Father,” “Mama” and “Papa,” and Jews are more likely to say “Mom/Mommy” and, of course, “ima” and “abba.” As expected, we also find clear intra-Jewish differences. “Ima” and “abba” are more common among Jews who have spent more time in Israel, who have more Jewish and Jewishly engaged friends, attend services more often, are Orthodox, or are members of a minyan. The use of “ima” and “abba” is most strongly related to traditional Shabbat observance. For example, 33% of Jews who refrain from handling money on Shabbat checked “abba,” compared to 4% of other Jews. We also see that the preference for “ima” and “abba” is much stronger in the younger generations:

% of Jews who prefer that their children call them or their spouse “ima” according to age

Age	% “ima” among Jews who refrain from handling money on Shabbat	% “ima” among Jews who have spent 10+ months in Israel
18-24	57	62
25-34	47	39
35-44	37	33
45-54	29	25
55-64	19	21
65-74	15	20
75+	8	10

When we look at this trend in combination with those discussed above, we see a change in progress: Israeli Hebrew is becoming more popular as a source for distinction among American Jews in kinship terms, names, and words used within English.

Changing Language

Clearly there are changes afoot in American Jewish language. But based on our observations, we suspected that the changes are not limited to younger people using more Hebrew than their parents. We believe that individual Jews have added Hebrew and Yiddish words to their vocabulary. To explore this, we asked Jews in all age groups: “In the past 10-15 years, would you say that the number of Yiddish-derived and Hebrew-derived words you use within English speech has increased, decreased, or remained the same?” The results were striking:

% of Jewish respondents who report changes in their use of Yiddish and Hebrew words

	Percent
Increased a lot	17
Increased a little	34
Remained about the same	39
Decreased a little	5
Decreased a lot	2
Not sure	3

About half of all Jewish respondents report that their use of Hebrew- and Yiddish-derived words has increased, and this is the case in all age groups. This could be related to the trend for many American Jews to become more observant. But we see increases even among many people who currently attend religious services the same amount as or less than they did as a child. We suspect that Jews of all observance levels use “shul” increasingly where they once used “synagogue,” and for those involved in synagogue life, “leyn” where they once used “read Torah.” An example is a baby boomer who grew up in California attending Conservative services regularly and now rarely attends services. She wrote in the comments section of the survey: “When I was growing up, I called it Temple. When my children went to a Day School, I called it synagogue. I now call it shul. I am not sure why.” The reason, we think, is that “shul” is gradually replacing “synagogue” and “temple” in Jewish American English. Linguistic features have spread past religious circles to people who have contact with them and beyond.

Conclusion

The survey of American Jewish Language and Identity has demonstrated that Jews wear their identities on their tongues, so to speak. Their distinctive linguistic patterns reflect influences of one of their ancestral languages – Yiddish – and their contemporary ethno-religious language – Hebrew. Although non-Jews, especially those with social ties with Jews, have acquired a number of Jewish words and other linguistic features, Jews use them far more than non-Jews. Moreover, a large number of words and other features are used almost entirely by Jews alone.

But language use not only differentiates Jews from non-Jews; it also differentiates Jews from other Jews. Age, denomination and traditional religiosity, Jewish education, New York residence, choice of interlocutor, and exposure to Israel all relate to Jews' use of words, meanings, pronunciations, speech styles, and even choice of baby names and kinship terms.

In addition, we find that the distinctive linguistic repertoire of American Jews is changing. Many Jews are using Hebrew and Yiddish words that they did not use in the past. Many Yiddish words (like “macher” and “naches”) are diminishing in use in the younger generations, and many Israeli Hebrew words (like “yofi” and “balagan”) and textual Hebrew/Aramaic words (like “davka” and “chas v'shalom”) are increasing. But a number of Yiddish words and grammatical influences are actually becoming more common among younger Jews, especially in religious circles (like “bentsh,” “leyn,” “staying by us,” and “she has what to say”). While we generally expect influences from an immigrant language to diminish over the generations, we find that some Yiddishisms are making a comeback among young religiously engaged Jews, especially Orthodox Jews.

Contemporary American Jews' language use aligns them with Diaspora Jews around the world who have distinguished themselves from their non-Jewish neighbors – and from each other – through their use of Hebrew words and other linguistic features. While speakers of Yiddish and Ladino spoke completely different languages from their Slavic and Balkan neighbors, speakers of Judeo-Greek, Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Persian, and dozens more languages spoke the local language with varying degrees of distinctiveness. While there are certainly differences between Jewish English and these languages of the past (such as the use of Hebrew script for writing), American Jews are in many ways continuing the linguistic traditions of their ancestors around the world. And just as Jews of the past had non-Jewish friends and colleagues who spoke elements of their distinctive language, so too have Yiddishisms spread from Jewish to non-Jewish circles.

American Jews' use of distinctive language also aligns them with other minority groups in the United States. African Americans use distinctive grammatical patterns, pronunciations, words, and other features. Latinos continue to use influences from Spanish and other distinctive features even several generations after immigration. For these groups, language is an important component of how they express their identity, and many of them use language that is much more distinct than that of American Jews. Of course, not all African Americans or Latinos speak distinctly, and those who do use different linguistic features with different audiences. For Jews, African Americans, Latinos, and other minorities, the selective use of elements of a distinctive linguistic repertoire enables them to align with some people and distinguish themselves from others.

Over the centuries, Jews have conversed in dozens of Jewish languages, mostly Jewish versions of local non-Jewish languages. Contemporary American Jews continue this chain of Jewish linguistic tradition. They use distinctive linguistic features from Yiddish, Hebrew, and other sources to situate themselves in the multi-dimensional social map inhabited by Jews of diverse social, religious, and demographic backgrounds. The most widely revered Jewish prayer, the “Sh’ma,” (“Hear, O Israel”) beckons Jews to listen. We’re not sure how well they listen, but we can be certain of how richly they speak.

Author bios:

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This summary is geared toward a non-specialist audience. Further analysis of the survey data will be released in the form of academic articles and books over the next several years. For more information or to post a comment, please visit <http://huc.edu/survey/09/>.