"What happened to my Yiddish?"

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Extrapolating from research on language attrition, the author describes the process by which her father—who migrated from Russia to the United States at age eight—"lost" his native language, Yiddish, to his second language, English, and the reasons for the loss. Among the variables associated with his language loss were his young age at time of migration, his long separation from speakers of Yiddish, his strong desire to assimilate, and the negligible extent to which he viewed maintenance of his Yiddish as essential to his Jewish identity.

Introduction

How is it possible to forget one's native language? It is a question that has interested linguists specializing in language loss for decades, but which drew my attention only a few years ago when, sorting through some papers of my recently deceased father, I found his handwritten "memories" (Chapkis). I had read them before, but this time I was riveted by five words I had not focused on earlier: *"What happened to my Yiddish?"* In this paper I attempt to answer my father's question by examining what research shows about the process of language loss and the likely reasons my father lost his native language.[1]

1 Background

In 1909, when my father, Fibel, was eight years old, he migrated from his village of Kakhovka, in the southern part of Russia, to the United States. He arrived, along with three sisters and his parents, speaking Yiddish and a smattering of Hebrew and Russian. The family settled in Pittsburgh, Pa., where they had relatives and where there was a sizable community of Eastern European Jews. Fibel was soon enrolled in the public school, where his name was Anglicized to "Frank." By the time Frank quit school five years later, he was speaking fluent, unaccented English, according to his American-born sister, Anna (Rafael). In his memoir, which Frank wrote in his eighty-ninth year (he died at age ninety-five), he said he quit school because of a teacher and bullying students who ridiculed his stutter. He also quit, he said, because he wanted to work at his father's harness shop, which was about to convert to one of the country's first automobile repair facilities.

[1] I did not attempt in this paper to speculate on which elements of my father's Yiddish may have been more permeable to loss and displacement than other elements. However, H. Seliger postulates a principle that states: "In the case where L2 [second language] becomes the dominant language of the bilingual and there is attrition in L1 [first language], those grammatical rules that serve the same semantic function, but which are simple linguistically, will displace similar but more complex rules in L1." He calls this the Redundancy Reduction Principle. As a corollary to this principle, Seliger offers this: "Transfer from L2 those rules that are similar and can be utilized to serve multiple functions in L1 while lessening the burden on memory to retain less generalizable rules." (1989:182)

When Frank was seventeen-years-old, he and an uncle drove across the country in an ancient Ford. They settled in Los Angeles, where they found work. A few years later, they opened their own garage. In 1924 Frank married my mother, Theodora Goosen, with whom he eventually had seven children. In 1946 the family left our East Los Angeles Jewish/Chicano neighborhood of Boyle Heights and moved to a predominantly gentile suburban neighborhood. There my parents developed friendships and lives divergent from their Yiddish-speaking relatives (including Frank's uncle) and had gradually fewer contacts with them. I recall my father speaking a mixture of Yiddish and English at extended family gatherings during the 1940's and 1950's. However, as these gatherings became less frequent and as more relatives died or moved elsewhere, there were fewer opportunities for him to speak his native language. Years went by without his speaking Yiddish.

In December 1979, when my father was in his late-seventies, his cousin Sam, from Pittsburgh, whom he had not seen in decades, came to visit. I, too, was there with my husband and children. We watched as Sam tried to communicate with Frank in Yiddish. I vividly recall my father's red face and his stammering and stuttering as he struggled to respond to Sam in kind. He appeared not to understand much of what Sam was saying, his responses were halting, and he corrected himself several times. They switched to English. It must have been a poignant moment for my father because he briefly recalls the incident in his memoir, ending with the lament, "What happened to my Yiddish?"

In attempting to answer my father's question, I am constrained by the fact that he no longer is available to observe, test, or question. I can't document the extent of his first language (L1) loss or explain with any certainty the reasons for it. However, a survey of the research on language attrition, augmented by his memoir, interviews with relatives, and my own recollection of past conversations with and observations of him, enable me to make what I believe are plausible explanations for the attrition of his Yiddish.

2 Terminology

Many studies use the terms "language loss" and "language attrition" interchangeably, and I see no reason to do otherwise in this paper. By language loss/attrition I mean "the disintegration or attrition of the structure of a first language in contact situations with a second language" (Seliger & Vago 1991: 3). In other words, the person is no longer as fluent in L1 as one would expect a native speaker to be. Also, many studies distinguish "language loss" from "language shift," with "loss" defined as a psycholinguistic process that occurs intragenerationally and "shift" defined as a sociolinguistic process that occurs intergenerationally (Clyne & Jaehrling: 64). However, I find the distinction unnecessary for my purpose, which is to shed light on possible reasons for my father's L1 attrition. Thus, I have relied on some studies of language shift in this paper.

3 What Was Going On: The Process of First Language Attrition

Answering my father's question requires an examination of both the *process* of language attrition and the *reasons* for it. This section looks at what researchers say about the general process of language loss.

Seliger and Vago would say that the two languages spoken by my father, Yiddish and English, came to "compete with one another, metaphorically, for a finite amount of memory and processing space" in his mind (1991:4). Applying their analysis to Frank, the competition probably was not apparent at first. His sister Anna recalls that, despite his difficulties at school (the stutter, the teasing and bullying, the unsympathetic teacher), he appeared to have acquired fluency in English and, for a while, he could speak both languages with ease.[2] Anna remembers that he spoke English at school, on the street and playground, and at home among his siblings; he reserved Yiddish for his parents and older relatives and some customers at his father's harness shop. She recalls that her parents also spoke a mixture of English and Yiddish at home.

Were it possible to have observed and tested Frank during his childhood and youth, evidence of his L2 dominance likely would have shown up in the phonology, lexicon and syntax of his L1. Extrapolating from Seliger (1989), there probably would have been signs of a reduction in his ability to retrieve elements from his Yiddish grammar and some substitution of elements from English. At an early stage of his Yiddish attrition, his comprehension might not have appeared impaired, but it is likely that his ability to judge the grammaticality of deviant utterances in that language would have been affected. In short, some evidence of first language attrition would have been there.

Had a researcher been able to follow Frank for decades thereafter—through his youth, middle age, indeed to the moment he realized he no longer could communicate with his cousin in Yiddish—the researcher might have concluded that English had displaced Frank's Yiddish and little ability to produce speech in his native language remained. My memory of his rare and halting attempts to speak Yiddish during his later years supports such a conclusion and fits squarely with Seliger's description of what is found in early sequential childhood bilingualism (1989).

3.1 Stage One: Transfer

Understanding the process of Frank's language attrition requires some account of the changing relationship between the grammars of the two languages he spoke and the role that universal grammar may have played at three stages of his bilingual development. Seliger & Vago (1991a) outline these stages, which I have applied to Frank as follows:

At the first stage of an increasingly complex continuum, Frank would have just begun the process of acquiring an additional linguistic system; that is, learning English. At his incipient stage of bilingualism, he would have used the knowledge of his native language, Yiddish, as a source for hypotheses about the target language, English (see, for

[2] It is not clear, however, if Frank ever fit Seliger's description of a "balanced bilingual" (1989:176); that is, one whose L1 and L2 co-exist and who maintains native-like fluency in both.

example, Gass, as cited by Seliger & Vago 1991:5). His hypotheses probably would have been wrong at first, resulting, among other things, in pronunciation difficulties for him. For example, the hard English "er" ending to a word is unknown to Yiddish. So, at first, Frank likely would have rendered "father" as *fathair* or "dancer" as *dansair*, and so on. Similarly, since the Yiddish pronunciation of "ch" is like the Scottish *loch* or the German *ach!* (the unvoiced velar/uvular fricative), his pronunciation of words such as "cheddar" also would have immediately revealed his foreignness.[3] Frank probably benefited, however, from some outstanding similarities between Yiddish and English grammar. For example, he might have noticed that English, like Yiddish, applies the possessive to nouns denoting animate objects, or that English sentence construction, like that of Yiddish, generally keeps the verb in close proximity to the subject (Weinreich).

Another source of linguistic knowledge that Frank might have drawn upon is universal grammar, assuming that these universals are valid for English grammar (see, for example, Chomsky; Cook, as cited by Seliger and Vago 1991:5; and Hyltenstam). At this stage in his bilingual development, a common base of knowledge would have served both grammars from Yiddish and transfer would have been a primary processing and acquisition strategy. However, also at this first stage, Frank may have made the same kinds of errors in English as the kid next to him in class, whose native language was Polish. If so, at least according to some researchers, (see, for example, Hyltenstam), the errors may have been the result of innate principles for the acquisition of language that were independent of Frank's first language, Yiddish.

3.2 Stage Two: A Gradual Separation of Grammars

The second stage of Frank's linguistic attrition, based on Seliger and Vago's analysis (1991a), suggests that there would have been a gradual separation of the two grammars, Yiddish and English. This would have been the result of his testing transfer hypotheses

[3] In the preface to his classic book, *The Joys of Yiddish* (Simon & Schuster, 1968, xxviii.), Leo Rosten notes that the teaching of English to Jewish immigrants was "an undertaking pregnant with surprises." He points out, for instance, a host of pronunciational shifts that affect a whole range of vowels and some consonants. Here are a few of Rosten's examples, along with his commentary on them:

(i) The short *a* becomes a short *e*: "cat" is pronounced *ket*, and "pat" becomes *pet*.

(ii) The short *e*, in turn, emerges as a short *a*: "pet" is rendered as *pat* and "a bad bed" becomes *a bed bad*.

(iii) The long English *oo* undergoes a transformation to a short *u*: a "pool" becomes a *pull*—and vice versa. To say that a dumbbell is drunk, Rosten says, a virtuoso might declaim, "That full is fool *shnaps*!"

(iv) The *w* regularly becomes a *v*: "We went to Willie's wedding" would be vivified, according to Rosten, into "Ve vent to Villie's vaddink."

(v) The short *i* becomes a long *e*—and vice versa: "pill" is pronounced *peel*. Thus, says Rosten, an Ashkenazic dentist might make this euphoric promise: "Rilex! I'll feel your cavity so you von't even fill it!"

(vi) The final *g* becomes a *k*. Thus, "walking the Muggs' pug dog" becomes "valkink the Muck's puck duck"—a metamorphosis "most unholy," comments Rosten.

(vii) Voiced final consonants tend to become unvoiced. "In such a vagarious world," observes Rosten, "one eats corn on the *cop*, spreads butter on *brat*, and consumes potato chips by the *back*."

against English language data and developing an independent set of English rules distinct from those of Yiddish. The researchers base this part of their analysis on the work of Corder, who distinguished between two different processes involved in second language acquisition: *restructuring* and *recreation*. Restructuring involves the adaptation of L1 hypotheses to L2 data; that is, transfer. Recreation involves the construction of special rules for the L2 without reference to the L1. Seliger and Vago refer to this second stage of language evolution as the *coordinate* stage of bilingual development because the grammars of the two languages begin to develop independently, even though there is still a role for L1 transfer and universal principles (1991:5).

3.3 Stage Three: Reverse Transfer

Extrapolating still from Seliger and Vago (1991a), the final stage of Frank's bilingual development would have involved an intermingling of the two language grammars. Frank would have become quite fluent in English, and English would have begun to encroach on his Yiddish. In short, the direction of transfer found in the first stage of bilingual development would have become reversed (1991:6) and there would have been a restructuring of Frank's Yiddish according to grammatical principles found in his English. It is not clear whether universal principles still would have influenced his English as they might have in the previous stages. Rather, it appears that they would have impacted Frank's Yiddish. (See, for example, Silva-Corvalan; Dressler; and Vago.) It is at this stage that language attrition would have been most evident for Frank.

3.4 Attrition or Code Switching?

Instead of language attrition, the intrusion of English into Frank's Yiddish could have been a case of "code mixing" or "code switching." If so, he would have been able to switch at will to one or the other of the two languages, depending on the topic or the person with whom he was speaking. However, code mixing/switching may not have been what occurred when my father attempted to speak Yiddish with his cousin Sam in 1979 because I could see that he was struggling to find the appropriate Yiddish words, and English kept insinuating itself into the conversation. In other words, my father seemed to have lost control of the conditions that constrain the mixing of the two languages, and he couldn't maintain the grammatical autonomy of each of them (Seliger & Vago1991:6). Were Frank around, it might be possible to test his knowledge by administering metalinguistic tests requiring him to judge the grammaticality of Yiddish sentences that reflect the intermixing of grammatical rules from English (see, for example, de Bot 1991).

4 Why Did Frank Lose His Yiddish?

Implicit in Frank's lament "What happened to my Yiddish?" is the question of *why* he lost his first language. Many studies focused on the causes of language attrition are sociolinguistic in nature and are concerned with what variables play a role in these processes. In my research, I found little agreement on which factors are closely tied to L1 loss. In a survey of literature on language contact, Weltens et al (1986:100) concluded that there is "an extremely long list of overlapping and interacting social factors … considered relevant…in different cases and by different scholars." These factors include, among others, age at time of migration, length of stay, level of education, gender, size of ethnic group, social contacts with other L1 speakers, rural vs. urban dwellers, and attitude toward the L1. From these, I have selected four variables that seem to have particular relevance to Frank's situation. They have to do with the following:

- his age at time of migration (which is more a cognitive than a sociolinguistic variable)
- his long separation from speakers of Yiddish
- his strong desire to assimilate and the ease with which he could do so
- the extent to which he viewed maintenance of his Yiddish as a core value inseparable from his Jewish identity.

4.1 Age and the "Critical Period" Hypothesis

Frank was only eight years old when he migrated to the United States and thus still within the "critical period" zone during which children can achieve native-like, that is, accent-less proficiency in a second language. He must have succeeded because neither my siblings nor I ever detected a trace of accent in my father's English. On the other hand, his cousin Sam, who arrived in America with my father and who was only five years older than Frank, retained a slight Yiddish accent throughout his life.

Evidence of the critical period phenomenon among immigrants comes from the psychologist Elissa Newport and her colleagues. They tested Korean- and Chinese-born students and faculty at the University of Illinois who had spent at least ten years in the United States. On grammaticality tests, the immigrants who came to the United States between the ages of three and seven performed identically to American-born students. Those who arrived between the ages of eight and fifteen did increasingly worse the later they arrived, and those who arrived between seventeen and thirty-nine did the worst of all, and showed huge variability unrelated to their age of arrival.

Although the critical period hypothesis may help account for the ease with which Frank acquired his second language and his accent-less English, it doesn't, of itself, explain why he lost his first language. However, an understanding of the process of language attrition described earlier, plus the following sociolinguistic variables, brings us closer to an answer.

4.2 Separation and the Diminished Role of Yiddish

The diminished role of Frank's Yiddish in use and function**,** exacerbated, first, by his long separation from the Yiddish-speaking community of his childhood and, second, by his decades of residency in the mainly Anglicized suburbs of Los Angeles**,** are among the most important variables accounting for his first language attrition. Once he left Pittsburgh Frank had little opportunity to practice two skills crucial to production of his Yiddish: repetition and imitation. Researchers on the speech production process, such as de Bot, would say that, lacking opportunities to repeat and imitate his native language, Frank wound up getting his Yiddish and English "mixed up" (1998). [4]

Several researchers address the issue of separation and language use in their analysis of first language attrition among immigrants. Among them are Jaspaert and Kroon, who indicated that length of stay in the L2 country was among the most relevant sociolinguistic variables accounting for L1 loss. De Bot et al, in their investigation of the loss of L1 metalinguistic skills in Dutch Frenchmen (1991), looked at time elapsed since migration and frequency of contact with native speakers of Dutch, concluding that time becomes relevant only when there is not much contact with the language. Their finding has relevance in Frank's case. As noted in the earlier discussion of age at time of migration, Frank and his cousin Sam spent the same length of time in the United States. However, Sam remained in constant contact with the Yiddish-speaking community in Pittsburgh (because he lived there); thus, he retained his Yiddish. Frank, on the other hand, migrated as a teenager to Los Angeles and spent most of his remaining years in Anglicized suburbs; thus, he had far fewer opportunities than Sam to practice Yiddish.

4.3 The Urge to Assimilate

Veltman examined the "macrosociological process" of assimilation to the L2 by various ethnic groups in the United States, comparing his own findings to data from previous research (using various sources from 1940 to 1976). He concluded that all ethnic groups in the United States show considerable "Anglicization" (that is, the L1 is subordinated to English), but the rate of Anglicization differed between groups. Veltman did not focus directly on the rate of Anglicization among Jewish migrants. However, the historian Irving Howe provides anecdotal evidence that the desire of Jewish immigrants to assimilate into the dominant American culture was strong, even if it meant subordinating their Yiddish to the dominant language, English. In *World of our Fathers* Howe said of the early Jewish immigrant's fascination with American culture: "To be an American, dress like an American, look like an American, and even, if only in fantasy, *talk* like an

[4] De Bot has attempted to adapt existing theories on language production to what happens when languages become "mixed up." In the Dutch language newspaper *De Volkskrant* (Nov. 1998) a reporter citing de Bot wrote: "Our mind contains a vocabulary of about 60,000 to 80,000 words in our native language. Usually an extra 20,000 words are added from other languages. We speak about five words a second. That means we have 200 milliseconds to find the right word out of a possible 100,000." If true, this might explain why my father seemed to blurt out whatever Yiddish words came to his mind during that memorable reunion conversation with his cousin Sam, after decades of not speaking Yiddish. De Bot, like Seliger (1989, 1991), seems to be suggesting that there is some competition between words during memory access that occurs in language attrition. This competition increases, according to de Bot, when we hear less of our native language, and further increases when we don't speak it often.

American became a collective goal, at least for the younger immigrants" (128).[5] As early as 1905, Jewish community worker, David Blaustein, noted, "Today, English is more and more the language spoken on the East Side [NYC], whereas eight years ago it was rare to hear that tongue" (as cited by Howe: 128). Such observations suggest that by the time Frank migrated to Pittsburgh in 1909 even more Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants would have been heard speaking English.

4.4 Jewish Identity and the Theory of Language as a Core Value

Like many assimilated American Jews, Frank held on to much of his Jewish identity at the same time that, ironically, he lost his ability to speak the Jewish language.[6] He went to synagogue, celebrated the major Jewish holidays, and loved lox and bagels, Jewish comedians, and Jewish literature. He occasionally uttered in Yiddish short Yiddish sayings and proverbs, but he didn't produce much ordinary speech in Yiddish that I was aware of after the 1950's.

Is it possible to retain one's Jewish identity, yet abandon—or worse, *forget*— all but a few phrases and proverbs in one's native language? Some researchers see no inconsistency in this; it all depends, they say, on whether language is a "core value" of the group or individual. Smolicz, for example, found that cultural groups differ in the extent to which they emphasize their native tongues as core values. Citing studies by O'Buachalla and by Harris and Murtagh, he observes, "One may [for example] be an Irish nationalist and be unable to speak Irish Gaelic, although the Irish language continues to act as a potent symbol of ethnic identity, even for those who are either unable to speak it or who have learned it at school but do not use it for everyday purposes" (280). In much the same way, continues Smolicz, "There are people …with a strongly developed sense of Jewish identity who uphold the continuity of Jewish tradition, but who speak neither Hebrew nor Yiddish, nor, indeed, any other specific Jewish-developed language or dialect" (280) .

One might question whether one's native language could be a core value if it is abandoned, yet with some effort might have been retained. Undeniably, Frank seemed to have had no practical use for Yiddish once he left his father's harness shop. He didn't need it to communicate with his schoolmates; he didn't need it for his work; and he didn't need it for social acceptance, either within his circle of Jewish friends or outside of it.

Still, it must have saddened my father to lose so much agility in his native language because it is with an unmistakable tone of regret that he asks near the end of his life, "What happened to my Yiddish?"

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[5] My father shared this fascination for all things American: blue jeans; big, fast cars; ice cream; baseball; Jimmy Cagney talk. Perhaps to his discredit, he took unabashed pleasure in being mistaken for an American "goy" (gentile), an error that my mother attributed to his light skin, hair, and eyes …and, of course, to his accent-less speech.

[6] Although my father could at one time speak fluent Yiddish, I doubt that he was literate in the language. My grandfather, who lived with us until his death, always left a copy of the Yiddish-language newspaper, *The Daily Forward,* around the house. I never saw my father reading it.

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