

The first decade (1963–1973)

Joshua A. Fishman, *Language maintenance and language shift as a field of inquiry: A definition of the field and suggestions for its further development.* *Linguistics* 1964, Volume 2, issue 9, 32–70. DOI 10.1515/ling.1964.2.9.32

Introductory comments by the author

The field of Sociolinguistics was founded summer 1964 in Bloomington, Indiana, the same year this article was published. I was then almost 37 years old. But my entire interest in topics related to this field began long before that and is strongly related to my commitment and activities pertaining to the maintenance of my own minority language – the Yiddish language and culture – as noted in articles written before 1964 (see my bibliography in Fishman and Njau 2012: 153–248).

My sister and I were raised in a Yiddish activist home in Philadelphia, where Yiddish writers, poets, teachers and leaders of Yiddish cultural organizations gathered together to discuss the creativity and continuity of the Yiddish language and culture. This was the air I breathed, the food (for thought) I digested.

While in our late teens, Uriel Weinreich, of blessed memory, (New York) and I (Philadelphia) hand-published a Yiddish Youth magazine called *Yugntruf*, together with Gabi, Uriel's brother, and the artist Ed Colker. We took ourselves very seriously and were deeply committed to the continuity of our own minority language in America.

At the age of 22, I came to Columbia University in New York to obtain my graduate degree, and worked as a Yiddish teacher for a few years to get me through my studies. It was then that I became more fully aware of other minority languages around me that were also struggling to stay alive. I began to study them, to try to help them – always guided by my own personal language struggle.

By then I had become a proto-sociolinguist and in the summer of 1964 (about the time this article was published), I was invited to participate in the Summer Institute of Linguistics at the University in Bloomington, Indiana. It was there that I met with scholars Charles Ferguson, Einar Haugen, Dell Hymes, William Bright, John Gumpertz, Stanley Lieberman, William Labov, and a few others. By the end of the summer, the field of Sociolinguistics was founded and my future was sealed.

When Gella and I married in 1951, we built a living Yiddish-speaking and Jewish-practicing home with our three sons and together went through the inter-generational process of language maintenance and language shift that I write

about in this article. We felt (and feel) a strong personal connection to all other minority languages that are struggling to “revitalize” themselves and that is the foundation upon which I have dedicated my life’s work.

Reference

Fishman, Gella Schweid & Charity Njau. 2012. Joshua A. Fishman bibliography (1949–2011). *International Journal of the Sociology of Language (IJSL)* 213. 153–248.

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