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Using Yiddish: Language Ideologies, Verbal Art, and Identity among Argentine Jews

ABSTRACT: This essay focuses on the struggle among conflicting language ideologies that occurs in immigrant communities. Specifically, it analyzes verbal art performed in Spanish and Yiddish among second-generation Argentine Jews, the offspring of Eastern European Jews who emigrated to Argentina in the 1920s and 1930s. Despite the prevalence of Spanish in daily communication and the use of Hebrew as an emblematic language, Yiddish is still used in certain poetic speech forms. This analysis addresses the effects of contradictory language ideologies—hegemonic and otherwise—on the performance of verbal art and on performers’ reflections about their speech forms.

KATHRYN A. WOOLARD has succinctly defined language ideologies as “representations, whether explicit or implicit, that construe the intersection of language and human beings in a social world” (1998, 3). One of the most intriguing discussions about language ideologies revolves around their alternate sitings. Are ideas about language implicit and naturalized (Kroskrity 1998) or contested (Briggs 1998)? Performances of verbal art, along with reflections about language use made by performers and their audiences, suggest that verbal art is a site in which language ideologies are both unspoken and subject to contestation. Using forms of folklore entails a naturalization of such ideologies; at the same time, and because performance always involves

emergent qualities (Bauman 1977, 1992), opportunities to question received notions also arise. In this article, I analyze the performance of verbal art among descendants of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe in Argentina in order to examine the effects of conflicting language ideologies in poetic speech.¹ My argument focuses on verbal art forms in two capacities. First, I treat verbal art as semiotic productions that in their enduring performance influence the adaptation of immigrant groups within a nation-state. In the case I look at here, this adaptation encompasses two specific and parallel subjective transformations: from immigrant to Argentine, and from Eastern European Jew to Argentine Jew. Next, I treat verbal art as aesthetic expressions in which traces of these social transitions can be located through analytical work.

Throughout my fieldwork, I constantly received negative responses to my requests for performances of verbal art from Argentine Jews of Eastern European descent. This reaction surprised me: as a member of this group myself, I have participated countless times in communicative interactions where poetic language is foregrounded.² These performances touch on the *shtetl* (village) imaginary so often associated with Jewish life in Eastern Europe, but they go well beyond it, crossing the ocean and traversing decades to become relevant in contemporary Argentina.³ And while these manifestations of verbal art are uttered in Spanish—the national language that Jews use daily both publicly and at home—Yiddish words are frequently interspersed, and marked in ways that call attention to themselves.⁴ This use of Yiddish takes place despite the fact that Hebrew is the “Jewish language” used emblematically in everyday conversation and in public performances such as civic ceremonies (both of which are primarily performed in Spanish).⁵ Given the prevalence of Spanish in the daily communication of Argentine Jews and its interweaving with Hebrew in certain noticeable expressions, those I asked for “verbal art” told me that Yiddish folklore was part of their distant Eastern European past. Since they claimed to have modest or no command of Yiddish, they concluded that they could do little with words, least of all perform them artfully. My challenge was to account for the expressions that I had heard many times at family celebrations, parties, meetings, and during informal conversations. I argue that these expressions may go unacknowledged as “Yiddish folklore” because of an ideology that relegates Yiddish language and folklore to an irrecoverable past.

However, the performance of these forms highlights the relevance of Yiddish and provides Argentine Jews with a means to reflect critically on how and why Yiddish has been conceptually erased from their everyday life. At the same time, the performance of those verbal art expressions restates Yiddish culture in the context of a national (Argentine) discourse.

Jews in Argentina: Community Building in the Context of a National Society

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, millions of Europeans—mainly from Spain and Italy—emigrated to what appeared to be the most promising land in Latin America: Argentina. This wave of immigrants included a large number of Jews from Central and Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa (Devoto 2003). Jewish immigrants established themselves mostly in Buenos Aires, the capital city, but some also settled in rural colonies sponsored by the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA), part of a distinct historical process of Jewish agricultural colonization.⁶ Although Jews moved to Argentina in substantial numbers during the second half of the nineteenth century, they were not the first Jews to settle in the country. In colonial times, a few Jews had established residence in the territory that became the Argentine Republic. The Spanish Inquisition in the Spanish colonies forced those Jews to conceal their identity until this regime was abolished in 1813. Even after the Inquisition, few Jews could be found in the country (Avni 1992) until the middle of the nineteenth century, when Jews working for large European trade firms began to settle in Buenos Aires (Mirelman 1988). However, the major influx of Jews from Central and Eastern Europe to Argentina started in the 1880s and continued, with fluctuations, until the outbreak of World War II (Avni 1991; Mirelman 1988). By the beginning of the twenty-first century, Argentine Jews numbered 200,000 (Della Pergola in Jmelnizky and Erdei 2005).

A set of opposing political and cultural ideologies overlapped during the decades encompassing the initial massive settlement in the 1880s, subsequent community building, and growing influence of Zionist groups over Jewish institutions after the 1950s. The intersection of these competing ideologies left an imprint on the subjectivity of those who joined what came to be called the “Jewish-Argentine community.” For children who were born to Jewish immigrants and

grew up in the 1930s and 1940s, conflicts between the discourses of the Argentine official realm and the Jewish organizations were quite salient.⁷ For this study, I chose to speak specifically with individuals who 1) were born to parents that arrived in Argentina at the moment of highest immigration from Central and Eastern Europe (see Avni 1992; Mirelman 1988); 2) were born in Argentina and thus have full Argentine legal citizenship, or who arrived at a very early age during the interwar period; 3) were educated in public schools, and thus purposefully enculturated as Argentines (Juliano 1978); 4) maintain current institutional links to the Jewish community of Buenos Aires by participating in social, educational, cultural, or athletic organizations marked as “Jewish”; 5) are of Eastern European descent;⁸ and 6) are not “orthodox” (do not take a literal reading of the sacred books, nor abide strictly by the *Halacha* or Code of Jewish Law).⁹ As the first generation of Argentina-born Jews adjusted to being “proper” Argentines and “adequate” Jews—as they adapted to the parameters established for their main groups by ascription—they sought to merge their Old World legacy with the influences of the new milieu. The discourses in which each of my study consultants were enmeshed all contributed to their perception and use of Yiddish speechways.

For instance, the public education system—with its emphasis on a standardized Spanish language, the deployment of national symbols, and, since 1943, the teaching of Catholic religion—was a primary institutional force that pressed an agenda of cultural homogeneity.¹⁰ Other policies also influenced the linguistic practices of Jews. The nationalist revolution in 1943, which took over the national government, acquired anti-Semitic overtones. The use of Yiddish in public meetings and ceremonies was explicitly banned and thoroughly enforced (Lvovich 2003).¹¹

After the 1950s, the dominance of Zionist groups in the internal politics of the Jewish community played a key role in the decline of Yiddish as the representative language. In a more imperceptible but nonetheless relevant way, Zionist control of Jewish institutions contributed to the downgrading of Yiddish as a language for everyday communication. Early on, as the community was being established (Schenkolewski 1988), the Zionist movement was an influential presence in Argentina. The founding of Zionist institutions and the promotion of their educational programs would have a lasting influence, particularly on the second generation of Argentine Jews who were

born in the interwar period. Zionist youth organizations projected a homogenizing force within the Jewish community that ran counter to Argentine nationalism. These youth organizations emphasized scouting practices that integrated boys and girls in social activities (unusual in other quarters at the time), re-created a calendar of Jewish festivals,¹² and most importantly, promoted the notion that Argentina was not a place for permanent settlement. Additionally, the conflicting ideologies of Argentine nationalism and Jewish community organizations were expressed at the linguistic level. The former postulated that all immigrants had to acquire Spanish, the national language, in order to be fully integrated into Argentine society. The latter held that Hebrew—not Yiddish or Spanish—should be the emblematic Jewish language. Zionist youth movements were one of the first non-religious institutions to teach Hebrew in Argentina. However, Hebrew would acquire institutional representation in Jewish organizations only after the 1950s, when the language started to be taught as an active component of cultural policies in schools, cultural centers, and informal education programs (Zadoff 1995).

In spite of these powerful forces, Yiddish continues to appear in multiple guises in the voice of the generation ordered to desert it. It materializes in a wealth of verbal art expressions. What is indexed when second-generation Argentine Jews perform Yiddish verbal art? I explore this issue in the next section.

Performing Spanish and Yiddish Verbal Art

Among the wide range of poetic speech expressions performed by second-generation Argentine Jews, I encountered folk names used to identify the regional origins of Eastern European Jews. In conversations about the immigrant experience, second-generation Argentine Jews are able to identify with relative accuracy the hometown of their parents. Most of the time, they can name a region or a place without a national location. In general, the idea of European ancestors who came from “in between” places is quite widespread in Argentina. Statements such as “somewhere between Lithuania and Poland” or “it was Romania at the time, but then it became Russia, it always changed” are commonly heard when people talk about their ancestors. However, in performance contexts my interlocutors established more precise links between people and those rather nebulous

locations. When teasing or making derogatory remarks about people who are not present, references to the regional origin of a parent is not uncommon, even more than half a century after the last Jewish immigrants arrived. In the context of a witty remark or a pun, saying that somebody is a *Poilshe*, a *Yekke*, a *Galitsyaner*, a *Bessaraber*, or a *Litvak* still identifies the target with a place of origin—the one where parents came from—and indexes associated traits. The fuzzy Eastern European location is transformed into a definite site.

When I asked during interviews about the folk names I had heard innumerable times in other verbal exchanges, consultants contended that they were usually meant to describe characteristics that immigrants from those places supposedly shared and which their children had apparently inherited. They also used these names to criticize other Jews: *Poilshe Yidn* (defined by my consultants as “Polish Jews”) are business oriented, while *Yekkes* (German Jews) are “arrogant,” “think they are of another kind,” that “they are German rather than Jews,” and “they do not even want to speak Yiddish.” *Galitsyaners* (from the Galicia region in today’s Poland and Ukraine) are perceived to be “tough” and “unsophisticated”; *Bessarabers* (originally from Bessarabia, in today’s Republic of Moldova) are “simple minded.” *Litvishe Yidn* (Jews from Lithuania) are intellectually gifted and speak “the most accurate” Yiddish—a blunt manifestation of the language ideology that asserts there are correct and incorrect ways of speaking (on the history and content of these stereotypes, see Harshav 1990). Additionally, many Argentine Jews claim these affiliations: they still consider themselves to be (to greater or lesser degrees, and in certain contexts of interaction) *Poilshe*s or *Yekkes* or *Galitsyaners* or *Bessarabers*. Competence in these speech play routines, in fact, sets up a boundary with non-Jews who may have a certain degree of competence in Yiddish. For instance, descendants of Spanish or Italian immigrants who are able to articulate words in Yiddish because they grew up in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood, or because their parents dealt with Jews on a daily basis in their business transactions, are not aware of those ascriptions.

My point in highlighting these affiliations is to illustrate their role in puns and witticisms that still have an identifiable referent and to point to their persistence in folk discourse outside the institutional domains of both the community and the nation. Jewish organizations have expended no effort to keep alive memories of these places of

origin.¹³ For the government, regional provenance has no relevance and that information is not retained in institutional records. But the processes of folk memory production have kept these ideas active. Given that most of the people born in the remembered places are gone and the institutions that represented the exact link with an original site no longer exist,¹⁴ the survival of “folk” identifications based on place of origin speaks of lasting subjective processes. These processes go beyond political or religious denominations and deserve further attention as non-institutional ways that Jewish Argentine identity is shaped by Yiddish.

In my informal conversations with second-generation Argentine Jews during social gatherings, I also noticed the extensive use of sayings. In the course of interviews, consultants usually identified those sayings with the Spanish term *dichos*, although they also called them *refranes*. The *dichos* and the *refranes* were emically conceived as epigrammatic Yiddish statements pertaining to the world of the “old folks.” Most of the time, they could not be expressed in full form and were completed or rephrased in Spanish. If they were said in Yiddish in full, as sometimes happened, the speakers could not translate them literally into Spanish and made a semantic rephrasing when I asked for a translation or when they thought I had not understood what was said.

The following is an excerpt from an interview with the couple Perla and Samuel, both children of Polish immigrants, and both born in Buenos Aires in the 1930s.

Perla: A woman I know from when we lived in Villa Lynch,¹⁵ a *Yiddishe* woman, she says, “Perla, can I tell you something in Yiddish? One of those phrases that my mom used to say?” I said—this is just what we are talking about now, sayings in Yiddish, “*Der epele fal nit vayt fun beyemele,*” that is, what you have near, the teachings.

Samuel: You understand?

Fernando: Yes, that the apple does not fall far from the tree.

Samuel: That the apple does not fall far from the tree, and that’s the way it is.

Perla: That’s the way it is.

Samuel: And that is the base of everything.

In this situation, the saying uttered by Perla, expressed fully in Yiddish, emerged as a means of bringing an expression from the past into the present. Through two instances of reported speech, a saying attributed

to the mother of “a Jewish woman” known by Perla is uttered in the context of the interview. Perla does not mention the original thematic context (that is, the reason this woman brought up the saying in their telephone conversation), but it can be inferred that they had been talking about somebody’s child or about the relationship between parents and children. Perla does not translate the saying literally, but she conveys its meaning. I then make a literal translation into Spanish when I am asked by Samuel, her husband, if I understand what she just said (consultants nearly always assumed that since I belonged to the next generation, I had no competence in Yiddish language). He then assesses the saying, which Perla repeats, expressing agreement with his evaluation. Samuel reinforces his assessment and gives the saying a wider, more encompassing dimension when he asserts that “that is the base of everything,” the moral implication being that one should be an example to one’s children. Here, what is at stake in the transmission between generations—in this case, information about ways of behaving in life—is embedded in a verbal art form charged with a positive aesthetic valuation because of the language in which it was originally uttered.

There are other ways in which the verbally artful voices of the immigrant generation are brought to bear in current exchanges. Situations during which these individuals interact with younger generations are particularly apt for the performance of verbal art in which Yiddish is used—even when the participants do not recognize themselves as Yiddish speakers or as performers of Yiddish folklore. In these interactions, the adult children of immigrants sometimes reenact the verbal exchanges they had with their parents in the 1930s and 1940s. The members of this second generation mediate between the immigrants themselves and their own children by evoking older voices through reported speech. I encountered many instances in which conversations between immigrants and their children were recounted.¹⁶

The following is a short passage from an interview with Elisa, a woman born in Buenos Aires in 1930 to Polish parents. Elisa’s daughter Martha also participated in the conversation. This fragment displays the replication of a set of linguistic play expressions, originally formulated five decades earlier by the interviewee’s parents. Their voices get into Elisa’s discourse through diverse concatenations: subtle intonational variations that index changes in speaking subjects, the introduction of direct reported speech, and, in the context of that speech, code switching. The interview takes place in Spanish, but when Elisa

voices her parents' speech, she uses Yiddish, amalgamating the two languages in order to communicate the creation of diverse social subjects in her childhood years.

In an earlier part of the interview—not included here—she had elaborated on the folk names Jews had for other immigrant groups, some of which persist to this day. According to Elisa, Jews called the Italians *Lokshn* (noodles) because they ate pasta. She also talked about the Spanish immigrants, saying that Jews called them *Gallegos*—a common appellation among all Argentines, which refers to the natives of the Galicia region in northern Spain. Then, in the segment reproduced below, she gets to the Argentines themselves. From the Jewish immigrant perspective, as Elisa expresses using reported speech, all non-Jewish women had one first name—María. The generalization *di Maríes* came about by turning the Spanish María into the Yiddishized *Marie*. According to comments collected in interviews and informal conversations, *di Maríes* was the name that Jewish peddlers gave to their non-Jewish clients. These *cuenteniks*—a term that combines the Spanish word for “on account” with the Slavic suffix *nik*—sold their merchandise on installment. They knocked on every door, sold their goods, and came back time after time to collect the payment, sometimes successfully and sometimes not. This occupation had been adopted by many Jewish immigrants upon their arrival to Argentina, and Elisa had mentioned it earlier. The *cuenteniks* would say “Ikh gey tsu di Maríes” (I go to the Marias), implying that they were going to work. Elisa begins by referring to *di Maríes*, but then suggests how her own identity as an Argentine woman was also established linguistically:

Elisa: [L]os argentinos eran di Maríes, las mujeres, di Maríes las mujeres, ahora este no se si, “argentina *chveke*”—sabes lo que es *chveke*? Son clavos. “Argentina *chveke*” a nosotras mismas, a mi hermana y a mí, “argentina *chveke foiles*”—sabes lo que es *foiles*? Haraganas, nos decían.

Fernando: A ustedes.

Martha: Claro, que ya eran argentinas.

Fernando: Ya eran argentinas, claro.

Elisa: [T]he Argentines were *di Maríes*, the women, *di Maríes*, the women. Now I don't know if . . . “Argentina *chveke*,”—you know what *chveke* is? They're nails. “Argentina *chveke*” to ourselves, my sister and me, “Argentina *chveke foiles*,”—you know what *foiles* is? “Lazybones,” they [her Jewish immigrant parents] called us.

Fernando: To you.

Martha: Yes, because they [Elisa and her sister] were already Argentine.

Fernando: They were Argentine, right.

As she describes experiences from her childhood to her daughter and to me, Elisa embeds immigrant voices of the previous generation, re-contextualizing them for the next generation in the process. Her performance includes both metalinguistic (Jakobson 1960) and metanarrative (Babcock 1977) queries. Through them Elisa authors a narrative that necessitates her active participation as a mediator between generations. The differences between the immigrant generation and that of their children are already evident in narrated time. Those between her own generation and the next one become apparent in the context of her performance through the translation of Yiddish terms that comment upon her story in narrative time.¹⁷

And how were *di Maríes* characterized by Jewish immigrants? Elisa refers at first to the Argentines in general, but then corrects herself by asserting that it was only the women who were called *di Maríes*. Consequently, she adds specificity to her definition. Then, she introduces another denomination, *Argentina chveke*, which she translates as “Argentine nail.” In this way, Elisa presents a second way in which Jewish immigrants conceptualized the Argentines (more specifically, Argentine women). She translates the word into Spanish (“you know what *chveke* is? ‘nails’” [*clavo*]) for an audience she assumes does not understand the Yiddish word. But Elisa does not delve into the term’s metaphoric meaning, one that comments on the point of her narrative. In the world of small business, *nails* refers to clients who do not honor their debts. Elisa does not consider it necessary to explain. She assumes that we share a semantic field. And she is right; there is no need for clarification, as can be derived from my silent response. Just as the Yiddish utterance marks the distance between three generations, the sharing of its metaphoric meaning signals the closing of that distance.

The construction of selfhood and otherness through speech play does not end at this point. Another layer engages the creation of new social subjects within the Jewish collective, based on place of birth (European immigrants vis-à-vis native Argentines). Elisa immediately switches the generalization from the outer, non-Jewish world toward herself. By uttering “to ourselves, my sister and me” she indicates that her immigrant parents themselves already assigned their

Argentina-born daughters the traits that they ascribed to the other “natives.” According to their parents, Elisa and her sister are *chvekes*, just like non-Jewish Argentines. They are even better characterized by the second adjective—*foiles*—which Elisa translates as “lazybones.” Thus, these expressions of speech play, used originally during home dialogues and now performed in the interview situation, index multiple representations: how Jewish immigrants conceptualized other immigrants; how Jewish immigrants viewed Argentine natives in general; how, by extension, Jewish immigrants perceived their Argentine-born children in particular. The Yiddish folk denominations based on place of origin that I described above indicate social ascriptions tied to an Eastern European Jewish geographic imaginary. These ascriptions endure and coexist with the novel forms of naming other social groups that originated in the new world and are linked to Argentina and to the multiple origins of its immigrants—as shown in Elisa’s interview above. These names are also determined by place of birth and ascribed characteristic traits (the Gallegos, the Tanos, the Argentines).

On another level, the speech play recreated in this conversation between the interviewee, her daughter, and the researcher describes the way immigrants’ offspring currently perceive their parents. Their speech is about speech. It enacts and foregrounds the consequences of the migratory experience. It looks back in time to see that settlement in Argentina has brought irreversible social and cultural outcomes, including the forsaking of the original language. However, as in Elisa’s story, many narratives that make use of Yiddish language involve the utterance of Yiddish in two temporally distant dialogic situations. The first situation involves native Yiddish speakers and Spanish speakers, and uses Spanish or Argentine referents (women called *María*, *chvekes*, *foiles*). The second dialogic situation occurs between Spanish speakers who quote expressions that were originally uttered by native speakers of Yiddish. The reenactment of speech spoken more than fifty years ago recapitulates certain elements of the process of becoming Jewish-Argentine, such as interaction between Jews and other groups, and the establishment of generational boundaries. Moreover, such reenacted speech puts Yiddish back to use for the creation of a heteroglossic language (Bakhtin 1981) that highlights the impact of the transition itself.

A look at other verbal art forms also calls for a reassessment of Yiddish’s alleged doom in Argentina. In addition to folk names linked to

places of origin, unfinished sayings, and personal narratives in which a Yiddish phrase or word comes “naturally” out of one’s mouth, Yiddish makes itself present in other ways. The most widespread and clearly identifiable genre is the “Jewish joke.” This genre has deserved wide attention by scholars in both the United States and in Israel (Ben-Amos 1973; Dundes 1971; Jason 1967), although none have examined the Latin American situation. The so-called Jewish joke has developed specific traits in its Argentine grounding. It necessitates further research that focuses on multiple contexts of use. Still, several points are germane to this discussion. In Argentina, the “Jewish joke” (*chiste judío*) is usually a humorous narrative whose dramatis personae are Jewish and act according to socially shared stereotypical images—the Jewish mother, the greedy businessman, the stingy Jew (Blache 1985). It is generically classified with jokes related to another group of immigrant origin: the *chistes de gallegos*, that is, jokes about people from Galicia in Spain. In joke-telling sessions, the two kinds of jokes tend to cluster. Although the stereotypical traits assigned to each group differ, they reflect a socially shared repertoire of publicly performed narratives involving groups of European descent who can be grouped together and address the notion of a multicultural Argentina.

Although so-called Jewish jokes are not told in Yiddish, they very often refer to Yiddish, most explicitly when a punch line is uttered in full in Yiddish; for instance, characters are identified by Yiddish names (Moishe, Rokhele), and speak Spanish with a clichéd pronunciation attributed to Eastern European Jewish immigrants whose native tongue was Yiddish. “Jewish jokes” are performed by Jews and non-Jews in the same way; they draw upon the same stereotypes and Yiddish vocabulary. There are Yiddish terms that have come to be widely known by Yiddish speakers and non-speakers alike because of their use by comedians or by the media, such as *tokhes* (buttocks) and *shikse* (non-Jewish girl).¹⁸

“Jewish jokes” are bounded, easily recognized, and generally performed by Jews and non-Jews alike. I was also able to outline another genre, the *manse* (Fischman 2008), after a long period of interviewing and analysis. The *manse* is a Yiddishized adaptation of the Hebrew *ma’aseh*, a gossip narrative that is metapragmatically despised as nonsense. It is a densely dialogic genre that encompasses multiple speaking situations, especially those involving the reframing of earlier dialogues about events deemed unimportant. I suggest that the *manse*—via what

in Hebrew are currently called *ma'asiot*—can be linked to the *ma'aseh* folktales from the Talmudic-Midrashic period (Bar-Itzhak 2005; Ben-Amos 1999; Yassif 1999). The genre designation *manse* attests to the staying power of a term. Although the genre has undergone multiple recontextualizations and semantic displacements, its name establishes a link between a Latin American present and a remote Jewish past.¹⁹

Beyond the realm of the everyday, new venues for verbal art performances materialize constantly in spaces shared by society at large. In the context of a growing movement of stage storytelling that began in the 1980s, for example, new forms merge literary works with folk traditions and sacred texts, which are recontextualized in unique manifestations. In this sphere, Yiddish language in the form of poetic expressions still plays a key role (Fischman 2009). Thus, in concert with its forced abandonment, Yiddish has been and is still constantly reframed in verbal art forms, in the shadows of the “suitable” languages—Spanish and Hebrew—and in interaction with them.²⁰

Reflections on the Performance of Yiddish Verbal Art

Although the precise reasons that bring about language shift still need theorizing (Tsunoda 2006), in the case of Argentine Jews the impossibility of uttering full statements in Yiddish or of making literal translations can be linked to the linguistic ideologies and policies that established Spanish and Hebrew as national and community languages. It is relevant here to explore how the speakers themselves conceptualize the process of language shift and how it relates to their verbal performances.

Second-generation Argentine Jews usually do not question the cultural uniformity of the state institutions that uphold a hegemonic and standardized Spanish language as one of its mainstays; however, they make critical reflections about the use and valorization of Yiddish. Although second-generation Argentine Jews participate in community activities, regularly use a number of Hebrew expressions, and even explicitly uphold Zionist views, they disapprove of official Yiddish language policies established by Jewish community institutions. Their sometimes overt and sometimes implicit statements in this regard index the complex national and community cultural struggle that encouraged the removal of Yiddish from spoken domains; their comments also reveal their own resistance to such pressures.

A woman whose parents emigrated from the city of Bialistock stressed that for second-generation Argentine Jews, Yiddish is the language they learned from their parents, the one they heard at home. She illustrates this claim by means of a Yiddish expression: “Yiddish for us was truly *momme loshn* [mother tongue].” Even though born in Argentina and socialized in Spanish public schools, her family considered Yiddish their native language. Much like other immigrants, Jewish newcomers and their children saw this “home” language wane as they integrated into Argentine society. In this respect, the immigrant experience and the practicalities of everyday life comprise additional variables that layer onto overt state or institutional coercion. Another consultant explained: “Then they [the immigrants] also went on losing it [the Yiddish language], not losing it but wanting to learn more Spanish for their life in the street, in their jobs.” Speaking Spanish instead of Yiddish appears to be a widespread strategy adopted by Jewish immigrants in order to adjust to their new country. Still, the fact that the children of Jewish immigrants consider Yiddish to be their mother tongue means that it was extensively spoken at home, no matter the degree of proficiency and fluency in Spanish acquired for daily interaction with the wider society. Several consultants reported that their first contact with Spanish was at age six when they began elementary school. One of them went on to add that she and her peers often made the same mistakes their parents did when they spoke Spanish: “We, the kids, spoke bad, because our parents didn’t know, until we started attending school.”

Other reasons for the conscious relinquishment of the Yiddish language relate specifically to the Jewish historical experience in the Old World. In the 1930s and 1940s, parents usually warned children not to speak Yiddish in public. The reasons for that prohibition apparently stem from a fear of displaying Jewish identity because of experiences in Eastern Europe, and because the immigrants perceived themselves as unwelcome in Argentina. These concerns mark a particular way of relating to their native tongue, one not shared by non-Jewish immigrants. These recollections usually acquire narrative forms. Zulema, a daughter of Polish immigrants born in Buenos Aires in the early 1930s, says:

[H]ere they would tell you, when you were going in the street or you got on a tram, they would tell you “Red nit af Yiddish” [don’t speak Yiddish]

because they were afraid, they would speak very quietly, they would speak very quietly, my father mastered Spanish, but not so much, in the street . . . it was about not calling attention.

The fearful protagonists of this narrative are Zulema's parents. At first, just after the deictic "here" that locates the narrated situation in the Argentine context, the immigrant parents are introduced with a generic "they." Later, her parents are summoned more vividly through speech: the warning, an utterance expressed completely in Yiddish, suggests that Yiddish *was* the language spoken at home. Further, the repetition of "they would speak very quietly" suggests the fear of being heard and thus recognized as Jews. A clear division between private and public domains had a bearing on where Yiddish could be spoken: while in the street, Jewish immigrants spoke Spanish and lowered their voices. Jewish identity—which might become evident through the use of Yiddish or signaled by a singular accent—had to be concealed. As Zulema summarizes it, she and her family tried not to call attention to themselves. This subjective feeling was reinforced by widespread public discourse and policies developed by the hegemonic sectors of Argentine society early in the immigration process that conceptualized Jews as a group that could not be integrated into Argentine society (Lvovich 2003). This sentiment persisted in the following decades, particularly in the 1940s during World War II and its aftermath (Rock 1993; Romero 1999; Spektorowski 1990).

Still, when this second generation explains the cause for declining Yiddish use among their own children—that is, in the third generation—they do not blame the national context as much as they point to the "new" leadership of Jewish institutions that established the primacy of Hebrew. They refer to the Zionist groups that took control of community organizations and even expelled leftists who upheld the use of Yiddish. Raquel, a woman personally involved in Zionist issues—she is married to a former leader of the Keren Kayemet LeIsrael and has a daughter living in Israel—made this point clear during an interview:²¹

[O]ur children lost Yiddish, but it was because of the management of those who were running things in the community, because we had sent our daughter, the eldest, to a Yiddishe *shule*, and they were supposed to teach them Yiddish, and then they started to teach them one class of Hebrew, and then the new ones, those who came with new ideas, they went on taking Yiddish out slowly, and it disappeared as a class, because

in a given moment they would teach all the class in Hebrew, but they taught them two hours of Yiddish per week, thus it wouldn't have been lost, but this way it was directly lost.

Notwithstanding her Zionist philosophy, Raquel views community policies regarding Yiddish with a critical eye: the home language was not only displaced, but "lost."

However, in contrast to the perception of Yiddish as a disappearing language, several interviewees stated the contrary: "Yiddish will never die." Other remarks pointed to the widespread notion of Yiddish as the common language necessary for a Jewish Diaspora: "With Yiddish you can get by everywhere." The following narrative segments from an interview, which discuss the reunion of dispersed family members, illustrate this view:

[W]e were in the USA at my cousin's place and he says to me, "Now I realize how right my mother was, because if I didn't speak Yiddish, you don't speak English, how were we going to understand each other?" . . . [T]he same thing happened to us in Israel, that we went to visit an aunt that we could speak both in Spanish and Yiddish with her, but she had a neighbor whom she liked very much, and she wanted to bring us together because she liked us also very much, and she was proud to show her Argentine family, the neighbor was Russian, so how did we understand each other with the neighbor? In Yiddish. So always, somewhere in the world it will be of use.

Calling into question the idea that all immigrants *wanted* to forsake their native tongue, the first remembrance suggests Yiddish language use did not decline because of ideological agreement with the hegemonic views of the nation-state (in this case, the United States, where a similar "melting pot" ideology maintained English as the one and only language to be spoken). Rather, Jewish immigrants set Yiddish aside as part of a strategy to ease integration into the receiving society. In the second narrated situation, which took place in Israel, the Spanish-speaking aunt was probably born in Eastern Europe (since she belonged to an older generation) and had later lived in Argentina long enough to master the national language before moving to Israel. Being able to communicate with this aunt as well as her Russian neighbor led the interviewee to conclude that "Yiddish is still a language in every country on Earth." Besides these considerations about the span of its use and its future viability, a generally positive aesthetic valuation of the Yiddish

language existed among my interlocutors. As noted above, one stated “Yiddish will never die”; another said simply, “Yiddish is nice.”

Does the alleged oblivion of Yiddish—marked by its generally fragmentary visibility in stretches of discourse—mean that Yiddish folklore is no longer important in Argentina? Utterances that exhibit a range of generic complexity suggest that Yiddish verbal art exists in a singular way in this Latin American country. Yiddish folklore is becoming Yiddish-Spanish folklore, or to be more specific, Yiddish-Argentine folklore.

Conclusions

Seventy years after the end of Jewish immigration to Argentina, Yiddish can no longer be heard in full conversational exchanges. Very few people are now fluent, and among non-Hasidic Jews there are no social occasions where speaking Yiddish is deemed appropriate—other than those contexts provided by groups that convene in order to learn, practice, or “refresh” the language. Still, neither the national hegemonic language ideology nor the dominant one within the Jewish community has erased the possibility that Yiddish may be performed and appreciated. Today, Yiddish resurfaces in poetic forms and in reflections that comment about the language’s fate in the Argentine context. Second-generation Argentine Jews perform verbal art forms mostly in Spanish. These expressions allow for, and in some circumstances require, Yiddish utterances. Yiddish—a language that had been pushed toward oblivion by the dynamics of immigration and by the effects of national and community policies—finds new expression in the guise of verbal art.

There has certainly been a retreat of Yiddish language, which no longer dominates the realm of everyday conversation among Jews. Few “native” Yiddish speakers—those who grew up speaking the language in Eastern Europe—remain alive; their descendants are native Spanish speakers. When these descendants need an emblematic tongue, they use Hebrew. However, among second-generation Argentine Jews and subsequent generations, Yiddish gained a new life in an indivisible combination with Spanish. Yiddish endures in heteroglossic verbal art forms performed in daily communicational exchanges and other venues such as stage storytelling. These expressions, anchored in the Argentine milieu, establish a traditionality with Eastern European Jewish culture through processes of contextualization that entail

interdiscursive combinations (Bauman and Briggs 1990). Speakers entextualize and reframe fragments of Yiddish speech in current interactions that take place mostly in Spanish. Such expressions attempt to minimize “intertextual gaps” (Briggs and Bauman [1992] 1996) among current speech practices and the discourses of the Yiddish-speaking immigrant generation. Those performances keep the Yiddish language in use and therefore challenge the diglossia between Spanish and Hebrew that was established as part of well-documented—although already naturalized—historical processes.

Despite the powerful influence exercised by state and community apparatuses, the current developments of Eastern European Jewish Argentine verbal art show that linguistic regimentation has not entirely erased Yiddish language from the speaking domain. In the interstices provided by daily communication in Spanish, new forms are being elaborated. These forms are still in the making. They are also still transitioning—as the offspring of Jewish immigrants continue to do as well. In this context, the configuration of an Eastern European Jewish Argentine verbal art is a particular manifestation of the creative process already analyzed for Argentine culture in general, namely, the existence of Creole expressions that have no corresponding formal Creole language (Cara 2003).

Although these verbal art expressions are not conceptualized as folklore by their utterers—but rather are presented as the replication of an Old World legacy or simply as unmarked discourse—their blending of Spanish and Yiddish in performance demonstrates that the Yiddish language and folklore did not stay in Eastern Europe. They persist, through a number of mediations, in today’s Argentina, and they demonstrate the interweaving of contrasting language ideologies. While the national language ideology goes unquestioned, the ideology prevalent among Jews in Buenos Aires is problematized when verbal art expressions that use Yiddish are performed or when people reflect about them.

The resurfacing of Yiddish in verbal art requires pondering the endurance of what has been historically conceptualized as “Yiddish folklore” in a Latin American context. In the course of two generations, explicit governmental and community regimentation has been instrumental in relegating Yiddish language to a domain where it seems irrecoverable: in the past, the “Old World.” However, users have not entirely cast off these verbal art forms. These forms withstand the

overt workings of homogenizing ideologies and provide the basis for a possible future restating of the presumably abandoned language. Creative uses of speech thus open up new arenas for discussion about how naturalization and contestation coexist.

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Notes

1. I use the expression “poetic speech” in reference to the poetic function of language, as theorized by Roman Jakobson (1960).

2. The issues presented here emerged as I analyzed interviews that I recorded and transcribed between 1996 and 2004. For this study, I conducted long interviews (two to three hours in duration) with second-generation Argentine Jews who were suggested to me by friends, colleagues, and students. However, my analysis is supplemented by a corpus of materials proceeding from innumerable settings over the course of my life, including informal conversations, rituals, and public festivals and ceremonies. Because I myself am a third-generation Argentine Jew of Eastern European descent, my collection of materials began long before undertaking this project. In 1989, as an undergraduate anthropology student, I took a seminar on folk narrative. I then became aware that my family and immediate community often generated stretches of discourse that could be detached quite easily from their communicative contexts, even though these verbal art forms were rarely recognized by their utterers as “marked” discourse. My labor of collection, transcription, reflection, and replication goes on today as a permanent metadiscursive pursuit. I leave further considerations about the implications of such in-group fieldwork for future work.

3. Three decades ago, in studies of Jewish folklore, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett noted the persistence of what she termed “an eternal and Pan-East European shtetl” (1978). This notion has become so pervasive that in the official discourse of Jewish organizations and in informal conversations, *shtetl* has come to stand metonymically for “Jewish life in Eastern Europe.” For examples of contemporary Jewish expressions in Argentina, see Fischman 2007.

4. Together with Yiddish proper, some utterances in the vernacular languages of the Eastern European immigrants' places of origin—Russia, Romania, Poland—are sometimes interspersed with Spanish and considered to be “Yiddish.” Papers presented at a 2006 conference on Yiddish language and culture called Buenos Aires Ídish, organized by the Buenos Aires City Cultural Heritage Commission at the National Library (Comisión para la preservación del patrimonio histórico-cultural de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires) suggest that Yiddish is still being used in daily communication more than is widely acknowledged. In addition to the current uses of verbal art forms in Yiddish that some of those papers describe, their contextualization as items that have to be preserved gives them a “second life as heritage” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998) whose perlocutionary consequences are still unknown.

5. Hebrew as the representative Jewish language is made apparent on many occasions. For instance, on the Jewish New Year, the Hebrew salutation *shana tova* is the most widespread oral and written form for wishing a happy new year. It is heard in face-to-face encounters among Jews, in the media, and also appears on street signs posted by municipal authorities. An attempt at denaturalizing speech leads one to wonder why the Yiddish greeting *A Gut Yohr* is no longer used or the Spanish New Year greeting *Feliz Año Nuevo* has not gained currency. Media and governmental discourses reinforce the use of the Hebrew salutation, in part as an attempt to underscore pluralism. The celebration of multiculturalism has been growing in Argentina, especially since the country's reinstated democratic rule in 1983 after seven years of military dictatorship. In earlier decades—during the time of immigration but also in subsequent years—cultural differences were either unacknowledged or assessed negatively.

6. The Jewish Colonization Association (JCA), a philanthropic organization founded by Baron Maurice Hirsch, sponsored agricultural settlements in Argentina (Feierstein 1999).

7. Throughout this article I refer to the generation that is the unit of analysis as “second-generation Argentine Jews.” In Spanish I define them as “hijos de inmigrantes” (children of immigrants), but for English readers the word children can be misleading, evoking the idea of youngsters. I am aware of the recent problematizing of the concept of “second generation” (Moncusí Ferré 2007).

8. The category of “Ashkenazic,” which was formerly used almost interchangeably with “Jew of Eastern European descent,” is becoming more and more problematic. In general terms, Jews from Central and Eastern Europe are called Ashkenazic and those of North of Africa and the Middle East are called Sephardic (Avni 1992; Mirelman 1998). I noticed that both terms—Ashkenazic and Sephardic—appear to be losing currency in everyday speech, although they are still used in institutional discourses and in academic studies (Guber 1984). Notwithstanding the specifics of the current categorizations, the association between the Eastern European Jewish culture and Yiddish is inevitable and is one of the unquestionable differences between Eastern European and Sephardic Jews.

9. Defining “orthodoxy” entails referring to a classificatory system of ritual practice that originated in the nineteenth century and involves three categories: “reform,” “conservative,” and “orthodox” (Neusner 1995). I chose to work with consultants who were explicitly not orthodox because the anthropological literature

on Jewish Argentines assumes a majority of “average Argentine Jews”—people who identify as Jewish, partake of activities in Jewish institutions, but do not define their Jewish identity in terms of strict religious observance (Barúa 1990).

10. Certainly, hegemonic discourses with regard to immigration and immigrants were not static throughout the decades of the “Big Wave” immigration, but some generalizations can be made. During and immediately following the “Big Wave” an ideal type of Argentine emerged, one of European descent, mostly middle class, and Catholic. Grappling with a classificatory system that categorically left out certain groups—namely, the indigenous and the descendants of Africans—posed a complex dilemma for Jews. Theirs was an ambiguous position. They had been part of an immigration wave that included other Europeans, and they exhibited a similar pattern with regard to their position in the social structure. They also possessed the one visible feature that put them on the “right” side of social valuation—European phenotypic traits. However, not being Catholic was insurmountable. In an urban society that was rather secular—given the important presence of anarchist and socialist workers among the Italians and the Spanish immigrants—the obstacle for successful integration was not posed by religious practice itself, which was not particularly active among any of the main immigrant groups. But beyond personal beliefs and practices, Italians and Spaniards and their offspring could embody a Catholic mainstream Argentine culture in a way that Jews could not.

11. In 1939, a presidential decree banned the use of foreign languages in public meetings. Although its alleged purpose was to control Nazi activities in Argentina, in practice it was used by the police to prohibit the use of Yiddish (Lvovich 2003).

12. The influence of Zionist youth organizations in the re-creation of Old World cultural practices is apparent in the analysis of the concept of tradition among Argentine Jews (Fischman 2006).

13. Jewish institutional discourse resorts to the trope of the shtetl mentioned above. There are frequent appeals to Eastern European Jewish life as the culture that was lost in the Holocaust. However, the association between Jews and specific Eastern European sites has been blurred.

14. At one time, Yiddish associations known as *farvein* were formed in Argentina by people from specific towns and regions. They carried out important mutual aid and social interaction functions at the time of immigration. Most of these associations are no longer extant; others have adopted names that no longer link European places to their current constituencies or objectives.

15. Villa Lynch is an industrial area in the outskirts of Buenos Aires; Jewish immigrants who worked for the textile industry settled there. It was one of the strongholds of Jewish workers’ Yiddishist movements.

16. Although my research was geared toward dialogue between second-generation Argentine Jews and their immigrant parents, in some instances consultants elaborated on their conversations with their children instead. In those situations, past and present dialogues merged. At first, that amalgamation seemed like a hurdle in my task of locating the process of transition from Jewish immigrant to Argentine Jew through the performance of verbal art. But it ended up being a significant illustration of the dynamics of sociocultural persistence and change. The dialogue involved more than two generations and indexed a multiplicity of other dialogic instances that had taken place both in a remote past and in a recent one.

17. For more on the double anchoring of narratives in “narrated event” and “narrative event,” see Bauman 1986.

18. In what seems to be a nation-specific semantic displacement, *shikse* offers an example of a term that was resignified in the Argentine context. A word of quite extended use, it has come to mean “cleaning woman.” The term is used in jokes as well as in personal narratives that are quite widespread among Jewish women, in which conflicts revolve around the relationship between an employer and her cleaning woman.

19. Among those recontextualizations that can be mentioned are the *mayse bikkhlekh* (folktale booklets) published in the sixteenth century and the *Mayse Bukh* published in Basel in 1602, which includes 257 tales (Ben-Amos 2008).

20. Elisa Cohen de Chervonagura argues that it was Jewish-Argentine multilingualism itself that contributed to the shaping of a distinct community (2006).

21. Keren Kayemet LeIsrael (Jewish National Fund) is a Zionist organization founded in 1901 with the purpose of buying land in order to help establish a Jewish state in the land of Israel. The KKL is still an active organization. Information about its activities can be found at its website, www.kklweb.org.

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