

# The Emergence of Two First-Person Plural Pronouns in Haredi Jerusalemite Yiddish

Dalit Assouline

*The Hebrew University of Jerusalem*

This paper demonstrates the rise of a new distinction in the first-person plural pronouns in Jerusalemite Yiddish, a contemporary dialect of Yiddish spoken in Israel by ultra-orthodox (*Haredi*) Jews. The distinction is semantically-pragmatically motivated, where a particular pronoun is used to refer to a specific subgroup of “us” compared with “them.” This innovation evolved as a result of both dialect contact and of the special sociolinguistic characteristics of the Haredi community in Israel. A rare phenomenon in the languages of the world, it reflects the unique self-imposed seclusion that is the social reality of speakers of Haredi Yiddish.\*

## 1. Introduction.

There are several typological distinctions in first-person non-singular pronouns, such as the well-known inclusive-exclusive distinction, in which the pronoun may either include or exclude the hearer (Cysouw 2002, Helmbrecht 2002). This paper discusses a rather different facet of first-person plural pronoun alternations, on the basis of data collected

---

\* I am greatly indebted to Na’ama Pat-El, Moshe Taube, Ruth Berman, and two anonymous JGL reviewers for their comments on an earlier draft. Any remaining errors are mine alone. The following abbreviations are used in this paper: (superscript) IH = Israeli Hebrew elements; (superscript) LK = Loshn-Koydesh elements. Hebrew segments are enclosed with (superscript) IH or LK. Glosses are according to the Leipzig glossing rules, with some additions: ACC = accusative; CNST = construct; COMP = complementizer; COMPR = comparative; DAT = dative; DEF = definite article; DEM = demonstrative; F = feminine; IMP = imperative; IMPERS = impersonal pronoun; INDF = indefinite article; INF = infinitive; M = masculine; NOM = nominative; PL = plural; POSS = possessive; PRS = present; PTCP = participle; REFL = reflexive; REL = relative; SG = singular. Stressed elements are written in capitals. Hebrew elements that are an integral part of Yiddish are not analyzed morphologically (see Weinreich’s 1980:351–353 distinction between “Whole Hebrew” and “Merged Hebrew”).

from a contemporary dialect of Yiddish, spoken mainly in Jerusalem by ultra-orthodox Jews. This dialect distinguishes between a specific “we” referring to a particular and clearly defined group, and a generic “we,” which refers to an unspecified group.

## 2. Sociolinguistic Background.

Israeli Haredi Yiddish (IHY) is a minority language spoken by several Jewish ultra-orthodox (Hebrew *Haredi*) communities in Israel (Isaacs 1999ab). All adult speakers of IHY are bilingual, speaking Israeli Hebrew on a daily basis, and also using what they refer to as *loshn-koydesh* (LK)—literally, Holy Tongue—in specific domains such as prayer and study.<sup>1</sup> These two varieties of Hebrew (both LK and Israeli Hebrew) serve as the main medium of written language in the community.<sup>2</sup> As a result, Hebrew is the functionally dominant language in the speech community, since it is used for reading and writing, as well as a spoken language.

The intensive use of Hebrew has a marked effect on spoken IHY. This is evident in the phonological system of IHY, which is practically identical to that of Israeli Hebrew, as well as in the lexicon of IHY, which contains numerous Hebrew borrowings. In addition to the Hebrew influence, IHY is characterized by vast variation in phonology, morphology, lexicon, and syntax. It also manifests a great deal of linguistic simplification, such as the loss of case markers and the rise of periphrastic constructions.

IHY includes two main dialects, “Hasidic Yiddish” and “Jerusalemite Yiddish,” deriving from geographically distinct European

---

<sup>1</sup> The term *loshn-koydesh* represents the Yiddishized pronunciation of Hebrew *leshon ha-kodesh*, literally ‘language-of the-sanctity’ = ‘the holy tongue’.

<sup>2</sup> The label “Hebrew” serves as a cover term referring to Hebrew texts from different periods in the history of the language (Biblical, Mishnaic, Medieval, etc.), with the Hebrew written by the Haredi community combining grammatical and stylistic features from these different historical layers. The Haredi distinction between Israeli Hebrew and *loshn-koydesh* is ideological or attitudinal rather than strictly linguistic: Haredi modern texts are perceived as being in *loshn-koydesh*, and they are articulated in the Ashkenazi pronunciation—as distinct from that of native Israeli Hebrew—even though they share the structure and lexicon of Israeli Hebrew.

forerunners. Hasidic Yiddish, arguably the most prevalent IHY dialect in Israel, developed mainly from Central Yiddish dialects, and is spoken in Hasidic sects such as Belz, Vizhnitz, Tzanz, and Satmar.<sup>3</sup> Most of the speakers of Hasidic Yiddish originate from East-European Jews who settled in Israel in the period between the two World Wars and after World War II.

Jerusalemite Yiddish (also called *Litvish* ‘Lithuanian’ Yiddish) is derived from North Eastern Yiddish, and its speakers include descendants of the *Perushim*, an ascetic group that left Lithuania at the beginning of the 19th century to settle in the holy cities of Safed and Jerusalem. The speakers of Jerusalemite Yiddish, the “Jerusalemites” (*yershláymers*, *tshálmers*), are a distinctive group within the Haredi community. Many belong to small, secluded groups considered *kanóim* ‘zealots’ because of their religious and ideological radicalism. The extreme ideological and religious stance of the Jerusalemites, combined with the fact that they maintain their own independent system of schools, enabled them to maintain Yiddish as a spoken language in daily use, in spite of the ever-growing pressure of the majority language—Israeli Hebrew.

A third dialect, derived from South Eastern Yiddish, is also found in Haredi neighborhoods. It has few speakers in comparison to the other two dialects, and many of its speakers who belong to one or another Hasidic sect are gradually switching to the prevalent Hasidic dialect, derived from Central Yiddish. Others, associated with the Jerusalemite groups, have adopted many features of Jerusalemite use into their dialect.

IHY dialects in Israel have become markers of communal affiliation, maintaining several salient dialectal features that denote group membership.<sup>4</sup> Speakers of the different dialects live side-by-side in crowded

---

<sup>3</sup> The exact number of IHY speakers is unknown (see an estimation of 15,000–20,000 speakers in Isaacs 1998), and so is the number of speakers of each dialect. However, taking into account the approximate size of different groups of Haredi communities, it is safe to assume that Hasidic Yiddish has the most speakers.

<sup>4</sup> The main phonological characteristics of the dialects are retained, thus reflecting the maintenance of separate groups within Haredi society. These phonological differences are identified by the speakers as markers of group affiliation, and are maintained as yet another means of specific group

urban neighborhoods, and the intensive contact between them has several interesting outcomes, as is discussed below.

### 3. The Corpus.

The corpus consists of spoken sermons (Hebrew *drashót*) in IHY delivered mostly in Jerusalem by men and women from different Haredi groups during the years 1991–2005.<sup>5</sup> The corpus consists of approximately 250 hours of recorded *drashót*, delivered by over 100 men and women. The sermon-givers (Hebrew *darshaním*) are considered the most fluent and skilled speakers in the community, and many fill prominent positions in the Haredi educational system. All were born in Israel in the 1950's and 1960's.

### 4. The Pronoun “We” in Israeli Haredi Yiddish.

#### 4.1. Historical Background: The Pronoun “We” in Yiddish.

In North Eastern Yiddish, the first-person plural pronoun is *mir*: *mir zogn* ‘we say’, *mir geyen* ‘we go’, with *mir* the nominative form and *undz* the form used in all oblique contexts, for example, *er zet undz* ‘he sees us’. *er git undz a bukh* ‘he gives us a book’. Other Yiddish dialects contain a variety of combinations of pronouns and verb conjugation. These include forms such as *indz zugme(r)* ‘we say’, where the historical oblique pronoun *undz* (pronounced *indz* in Central and South Eastern Yiddish) is used as the nominative and precedes the verb, and the verb takes the suffix *me(r)* rather than *-(e)n*. Another option is use of the mixed form *indz zugn* (Herzog 1965:147–149; see Prilutski 1921:14–33 for additional forms).

#### 4.2. Current Variation.

Analysis of the corpus revealed a variation in first-person plural pronouns in both dialects, as is seen in table 1.

---

identification. Leveling and inter-dialect borrowing exist, but only when the dialectal traits are not identified as specific communal markers.

<sup>5</sup> Work on the recorded corpus of the *drashót* was supplemented by additional fieldwork for data collection and observation in Haredi neighborhoods by the author of this paper.

	Nominative	Oblique
Jerusalemite Yiddish	<i>mir</i> (95%–99%) <i>undz</i> (1%–5%)	<i>undz</i>
Hasidic Yiddish	<i>indz</i> (85%–95%) <i>mir</i> (5%–15%)	<i>indz</i>

Table 1. The distribution of first-person plural pronouns.

In Eastern Europe Yiddish, the usage of first-person plural pronouns differed according to geographical dialectal boundaries, whereas in Israel, as a result of dialect contact, both *mir* and *undz/indz* serve in both dialects. However, while Hasidic Yiddish freely alternates between *mir gayen*, *indz gayen*, and sometimes *indz gaymer* ‘we go’ as semantically equivalent variants, this is not the case in Jerusalemite Yiddish.

Speakers of Jerusalemite Yiddish use the widespread variant *mir* as in *mir geyen* ‘we go’ as an unmarked pronoun that denotes a generic “we,” equivalent to the Yiddish impersonal pronoun *me(n)* as in *me geyt* ‘one goes’ (compare French *on*, Swedish *man*). The pronouns *mir* and *me(n)* generally appear in the same contexts, often in alternation with one another. The form *mir* is typically clitic and unstressed. The nominative pronoun *undz* is rarely used (in only around 1%–5% of all occurrences of nominative first-person plural pronouns in the corpus), and serves to refer to a specific group of people. It may appear as an independent pronoun in cases such as appositional constructions, and is typically stressed. Of the two pronouns, *undz* is distributionally marked: *undz* can be replaced by *mir*, but not the other way around.

**5. Examples.**

Examples 1–3 are taken from a sermon delivered by a leader of one of the Jerusalemite groups. The speaker is a man in his fifties, and the sermon was recorded in 1997.

- (1) di                    velt            iz                    dem  
 DEF.F.SG    world            be.PRS.3sg    DEF.DAT.M.SG
- eybersht-n-s.                    er            o-t                    undz  
 Most High-DAT-POSS    he            have.PRS-3sg    we.ACC

do ge-shik-t, tsu zay-n,  
 here PTCP-send- PTCP to be-INF

un er o-t undz ge-geb-n  
 and he have.PRS-3sg we.DAT PTCP-give-PTCP

a <sup>IH</sup>tokhnít<sup>IH</sup> vos **mir** zol-n  
 INDF plan what we should.PRS-1pl

to-n, <sup>IH</sup>ve-zéu<sup>IH</sup>.  
 do-INF and-it\_is

‘The world is God’s. He sent us here, to exist, and he gave us a plan, what **we** have to do, and that’s it.’

(2) der militer it af-n fon,  
 DEF.NOM.M.SG army guard.PRS.3sg on-DEF.DAT.M.SG flag

it af di médine. un DI  
 guard.PRS.3sg on DEF.F.SG country and DEM.F.SG

médine tor men nisht it-n. **undz**  
 country must.PRS.3sg IMPERS not guard- INF we

darf-n vel-n az zi zol ver-n  
 have to.PRS-1pl want-INF COMP she should.PRS.3sg become-INF

oys, si (=se iz) nisht bikhlál undzer-e.  
 no\_more it is not at\_all our-F.SG

‘The army protects the flag, protects the state. And this state must not be protected. **We** should want it to cease to exist. It’s not ours at all.’

In 1, the pronoun *mir* denotes a general “we,” which can be replaced by the impersonal *me(n)*. *Vos mir zoln ton* ‘what we have to do’ is interchangeable with: *vos me zol ton* ‘what has to be done’. In contrast,

in the second example, the pronoun *undz* refers to the specific group of Haredi non-Zionist Jews.

In 3 (from the same sermon-giver), the speaker recites from the first benediction of the *Shema* prayer. He quotes from the benediction “he who forms light and creates darkness,” mediating over the rare divine attribute in this benediction “master of the universe” (as opposed to the more common “our God” or “God of Israel”).

- (3) LK“*eloykéy óyloṃ*, *be-rakhamé-kho o-rábim*  
 God.CNST world in-mercy-POSS.2M.SG DEF-many
- rákhem oléy-nu*<sup>LK</sup> ... *vos i(=iz) do*  
 have mercy.IMP.2M.sg on-1PL what be.PRS.3sg here
- intresant?* LK“*eloykéy óyloṃ*”<sup>LK</sup>. *ale mol bet-n*  
 interesting? God.CNST world all time beg.PRS-1pl
- mir** *dem eybersht-n alts UNDZER got.*  
 we DEF.ACC.M.SG Most High-ACC as our God
- alts* LK*eloykéy-nu. eloykéy isroel*<sup>LK</sup>.  
 as God-POSS.1PL God.CNST Israel
- do bet men dem*  
 here beg.PRS.3sg IMPERS DEF.ACC.M.SG
- eybersht-n* LK“*eloykéy óyloṃ*”<sup>LK</sup>. *ikh gedenk*  
 Most High-ACC God.CNST world I remember.PRS.1sg
- nisht nokh a mol vos me zog-t azey:*  
 not another INDF time REL IMPERS say.PRS-3sg so
- UNDZ** *bet-n bakóshe-s dem eybersht-n*  
 we beg.PRS-1pl request-PL DEF.ACC.M.SG Most High-ACC
- alts* LK“*eloykéy óyloṃ*”<sup>LK?</sup> ... *der shvakh iz*  
 as God.CNST world DEF.NOM.M.SG praise be.PRS.3sg

far dem eybersht-n alts <sup>LK</sup>“eloykéy óyloṃ”<sup>LK</sup>...  
 for DEF.DAT.M.SG Most High-DAT as God.CNST world

dos i(=iz) nisht dávke far-n  
 that be.PRS.3sg not just for-DEF.DAT.M.SG

idish-n folk.  
 jewish-DAT.M.SG people

“Master of the universe, with your great compassion have mercy on us” ... What is interesting here? “Master of the universe.” **We** always pray to God as “OUR God.” As “our God, God of Israel.” Here we pray (lit. one prays) to God “Master of the universe.” I don’t remember another occasion where we say this: **WE** pray to God as “Master of the universe?” ... The praise is for God as Master of the universe ... it is not specifically for the Jewish people.’

The speaker emphasizes that in this benediction God is praised as master of the universe—a general term of praise that is not specific to the Jewish people. Significantly, the pronouns *mir* and *men* (*betn mir* [...] *bet men*) are used interchangeably, while the pronoun *undz* refers to the Jewish people.

Examples 4 and 5 are from a sermon delivered by a Jerusalemite woman in 2001. In 4 the speaker uses the pronouns *mir* and *men* interchangeably.

(4) si(=se iz) nisht genuk a(=az) mi veys-t. **mir**  
 it is not enough COMP IMPERS know.PRS-3sg we  
 veys-n ales, a sakh zakh-n veys-n **mir**.  
 know.PRS-1pl everything many thing-PL know.PRS-1pl we  
 ober nokh-n os(=dos) vis-n  
 but after-DEF.DAT.M.SG DEM know-INF  
 darf men os arayn-nem-en in harts-n.  
 have to.PRS.3sg IMPERS DEM in-take-INF in heart-DAT

‘It’s not enough that one knows. **We** know everything, **we** know many things. But after knowing something, one has to internalize it.’



In 5, the same speaker describes a blood libel spread in the 18th century, while making the following general statements about Jews and non-Jews.

(5) ir goy-im, ir veys-t, vifl plen-er  
 you.PL gentile-PL you.PL know.PRS-2pl how\_many plan-PL

ir makh-t af undz ... zey veys-n vos  
 you.PL make.PRS-2pl upon we.DAT they know.PRS-3pl what

zey makh-n af undz, un **undz** veys-n nisht.  
 they make.PRS-3pl upon we.DAT and we know.PRS-1pl not

‘You gentiles, you know how many plots you make against us ... They know what they do to us, and **we** do not know.’

Here the speaker uses the pronoun *undz* to refer to the Jewish people, as opposed to non-Jews.

Examples 6–9 are taken from a sermon delivered in 1999 by a Jerusalemite woman, a teacher who preaches about motherhood and child education. The pronoun *mir* in 6 is generic, while the pronoun *undz* in 7–9 refers to specific groups.

(6) der eybisht-er veys-t eykh  
 DEF.NOM.M.SG Most High-NOM know.PRS-3sg also

vos **mir** ob-n ge-trakh-t bi-shás máyse.  
 what we have.PRS-1pl PTCP-think-PTCP at\_the\_time

der eybisht-er veys-t vi  
 DEF.NOM.M.SG Most High-NOM know.PRS-3sg how

shtark **mir** ob-n es ge-to-n,  
 strong we have.PRS-1pl it PTCP-do-PTCP

vayl **mir** muz-n tsu vayl **mir** vil-n.  
 because we must.PRS-1pl or because we want.PRS-1pl

‘God also knows what **we** thought at the time. God knows how strongly **we** did it, whether because **we** have to or because **we** want to.’

- (7) der eybisht-er vil UNDZ,  
 DEF.NOM.M.SG Most High-NOM want.PRS.3sg we.ACC
- mentsh-n, mit retséyn-es, mit a  
 human being-PL with desire-PL with INDF
- yeytser-óre, UNDZ zol (=zoln)  
 inclination\_to\_evil we should.PRS.1pl
- im din-en. undz TAKE, undz shvakh-e vayb-er  
 he.DAT worship-INF we really we weak-PL woman-PL
- mit vayberish-e kep, mit vayberish-e retséyn-es, mit  
 with feminine-PL head.PL with feminine-PL desire-PL with
- vayberish-e dárge-s zol (=zoln) im din-en.  
 feminine-PL degree-PL should.PRS.1pl he.DAT worship-INF
- ‘God wants US, humans with desires, with an evil inclination,  
 [literally] (that) WE should worship him. We, indeed, we weak  
 women with women’s brains, with women’s desires, with women’s  
 spiritual degrees, should worship him.’
- (8) der shóyresh fun a boym ze-t nisht vos  
 DEF.NOM.M.SG root of INDF tree see.PRS-3sg not what
- se tu-t zakh eybn... azey zen-en undz  
 it do.PRS-3sg REFL above so be.PRS-1pl we
- mame-s. mir zen-en a shóyresh: mir gib-n,  
 mother-PL we be.PRS-1pl INDF root we give.PRS-1pl
- mir gib-n, mir gib-n, mir gib-n,  
 we give.PRS-1pl we give.PRS-1pl we give.PRS-1pl
- mir ze-en nisht. me shpondzhe-t,  
 we see.PRS-1pl not IMPER wash\_floor.PRS-3sg

siz (=se iz) nokh a mol shmutsik, me kokh-t,  
 it is more INDF time dirty IMPERS cook.PRS-3sg

siz (=se iz) leydik, me vash-t, iz shmutsik.  
 it is empty IMPERS launder.PRS-3sg be.PRS.3sg dirty

‘The root of a tree does not see what happens above ... **we** mothers are the same. **We** are a root: **we** give, **we** give, **we** give, **we** give—**we** don’t see. We wash the floor—it gets dirty again, we cook—it’s empty, we do the laundry—it’s dirty (all over again).’

(9) eyn-e o-t mir ge-zog-t, zog-t zi  
 one-F have.PRS-3sg I.DAT PTCP-say-PTCP say.PRS-3sg she

az ba undz mutshe-t men zakh mit  
 COMP at we.DAT torment.PRS-3sg IMPERS REFL with

di kind-er, me o-t aza shver-n  
 DEF.PL child-PL IMPERS have.PRS-3sg such\_a hard-ACC

lebn. zog ikh ir: si (=se iz) dokh do  
 life say.PRS.1sg I she.DAT it is though here

a geshmak-er-e lebn vi **undz** ob-n?  
 INDF tasty-COMPR-F.SG life than we have.PRS-1pl

IR o-t a shver-n lebn. a gants-n  
 you.PL have.PRS-2pl INDF hard-ACC life INDF whole-ACC

lebn nokh-leyf-n ayer-e táyve-s, un ir zen-t  
 life after-run-INF your-PL lust-PL and you.PL be.PRS-2pl

keyn mol nisht tsufridn.  
 not\_a time not content

‘One woman told me, she says that we work so hard with the children, we have such a difficult life. I tell her: Is there actually a

sweeter life than the life that **we** lead? YOU have a difficult life. For a lifetime pursuing your desires, and you are never satisfied.'

In 6, the pronoun *mir* refers to a general "we" and is equivalent to the impersonal *me(n)* ('God also knows what we thought at the time = God also knows what one thought at the time' or 'what was being thought ...').

The pronoun *undz* that appears in 7–9 refers to a well-defined group: to women (7), to mothers (8), and to the Haredi Jews (9). In example 8, the pronoun *undz* appears as an apposition to the noun "mothers," referring to a specific group of mothers. After this single occurrence, the specification of the mothers' actions is expressed with the pronoun *mir* or with the impersonal *me(n)*. This is a common occurrence within the corpus, alongside the usage of *undz* in appositional constructions.

Although *mir* is usually clitic while *undz* is often independent, the distinction between these two pronouns is not grammatical, that is, a distinction between stressed and unstressed pronouns, but rather semantic. The pronoun *mir* may also be independent and stressed, but its meaning remains generic, as in 10.

- (10) Avróm      Ovínu ...      ven      me      o-t      im  
 Abraham    our\_father    when    IMPERS    have.PRS-3sg    he.ACC
- arayn-gi-vorf-n      in    kivshn oéysh      o-t      er  
 in-PTCP-throw-PTCP    in    furnace\_of\_fire    have.PRS-3sg    he
- nokh    nisht    ge-vus-t      vos    **MIR**    veys-n,      az  
 still    not    PTCP-know-PTCP    what we    know.PRS-1pl    COMP
- er    e-t (=vet)    eykht    aroys-gey-n    fun    dortn.  
 he    will-3sg    also    out-go-INF    from    there

'Our forefather Abraham ... when he was thrown into the furnace of fire, he did not know then what **WE** know: that he would also come out of there.'

In this example, taken from a sermon delivered in 1993 by a Jerusalemite woman, the pronoun *mir* is a general "we," opposed to

Abraham (and not a specific “we” opposed to another group), that can be replaced by the impersonal *me(n)* ‘He did not know then what we know now/what is known today’. The same speaker uses the pronoun *undz* in her sermons only to refer to a specific group of Jerusalemite women.

However, due to the semantic distinction between *mir* and *undz*, it is more likely that *undz*, typically used to refer to a social group (usually in opposition to a different group: *us* versus *them*), will generally be stressed.

Examples 11–13 are from a woman belonging to a Jerusalemite group, whose dialect derives from South Eastern Yiddish. The sermon was delivered in 1999.

- (11) **mir** gey-en in gas. **mir** ze-en a  
 we go.PRS-1pl in street we see.PRS-1pl INDF
- murishke. interesir-t indz fin de murishke?  
 ant interest.PRS-3sg we.DAT from DEF.F.SG ant

‘We walk in the street. We see an ant. Do we care about the ant?’

- (12) yetst, oyb **MIR** vil-n,  
 now if we want.PRS-1pl
- az der oybersht-er  
 COMP DEF.NOM.M.SG Most High-NOM
- zol zikh far indz nits-n mit di  
 should.PRS.3sg REFL for we.DAT use-INF with DEF.PL
- draytsn míde-s, darf-n **mir** LK“aní  
 thirteen measure-PL have to.PRS-1pl we I
- le-dóyd-i ve-dóyd-i li”LK.  
 to-beloved-POSS.1sg and-beloved-POSS.1sg to\_me

‘Now, if WE want God to treat us with his thirteen attributes (of mercy), we have to [act in the manner of] “I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine” (Song of Songs, 6, 3).’

- (13) me        darf                    dos    zog-n    zeyer    forzikhtik,  
 IMPERS   have to.PRS.3sg   DEM   say-INF   very    careful
- me        darf                    dos zogn    vort    ba    vort,    un    zogn -,  
 IMPERS   have to.PRS.3sg   DEM   say-INF   word   by   word   and   say-INF
- INDZ**   ken-en            nisht,   ober   di            men-er    zog-n  
 we        can.PRS-1pl   not    but    DEF.PL   man-PL   say.PRS-3pl
- dos    mit-n                    nign    azoy    vi        me  
 DEM   with-DEF.DAT.M.SG   melody   as    how    IMPERS
- leyen-t        dos    in    di            tóyre.  
 read.PRS-3sg   DEM   in    DEF.F.SG   Torah

‘One has to say it very carefully, one has to recite it word by word, and say -, WE cannot, but the men say it with a melody, as when reading from the Torah.’

In 11, the pronoun *mir* is used as a general “we,” and can be replaced by the impersonal pronoun *me(n)*: *mir geyen in gas* ‘we walk in the street’ in the sense of *me geyt in gas* ‘one walks/people walk in the street’. In 12, the stressed pronoun *mir* does not refer to any specific social group, while in 13, the stressed pronoun *indz* refers to women, as opposed to men.

Examples 14 and 15 are from a reputed Jerusalemite *melámed*—a teacher in a *khéyder*, the traditional Jewish religious school for young boys. In 14, the *melámed* speaks to other *melámdim*, and describes the *melámed*’s influence on the disciple’s spiritual degree. According to him, the *melámed* can determine whether the child will grow to be a layman, or whether the child will become a true scholar who devotes his entire time to the study of the Torah.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> The word used in this case is *balebatish*, an adjective derived from *balebós*, lit. ‘house owner’; a working man who sets fixed times for Torah study, but is not a scholar.

- (14) di <sup>LK</sup>dárgé rúkhni-s<sup>LK</sup> fun mentsh iz  
 DEF.F.SG degree spiritual-F.SG of man be.PRS.3sg  
 níkva zeyer a sakh un zeyer shtark durkh  
 determined very many and very greatly through  
 zayn-e mekhánkh-im ... eyber **mir** zayn-en  
 his-PL teacher-PL if we be.PRS-1pl  
 mekhánekh poshet-e mentsh-n, mer  
 educate simple-PL man-PL more  
 balebatish-e mentsh-n, ken men mon-en  
 laymanish-PL man-PL can.PRS.3sg IMPERS demand-INF  
 ba zey balebátish-e tayne-s, balebatish-e  
 at they.DAT laymanish-PL claim-PL laymanish-PL  
 tvíe-s: er zol koyvéa  
 demand-PL he should.PRS.3sg fix  
 zay-n <sup>LK</sup>ít-im l-a-téyre<sup>LK</sup>, er zol daven-en  
 be-INF time-PL to-DEF-Torah he should.PRS.3sg pray-INF  
 geshmak-er. eyb **mir** zayn-en megádl <sup>LK</sup>lóymd-ey  
 tasty-COMPR if we be.PRS-1pl raise learner-PL.CNST  
 téyre, améyl-ey téyre, óyvdey  
 Torah labourer-PL.CNST Torah worker-PL.CNST  
 a-shém bi-mesírus<sup>LK</sup>, ken men mon-en  
 DEF-name in-devotion can.PRS.3sg IMPERS demand-INF  
 ba im eps a ander sort shimenésre,  
 at he-DAT somewhat INDF other sort 18 [name of prayer]  
 er iz a ekh-er-e dárgé.  
 he be.PRS.3sg INDF high-COMPR-FEM degree

‘A person’s spiritual level is often and greatly influenced by his teachers ... If **we** educate simple people, people that are more “laymen,” one can demand from them a layman’s claims, a layman’s demands: he should establish fixed times for Torah study, he should pray with more intense devotion. If **we** are raising Torah learners, Torah toilers, the Lord’s devoted worshipers, one can

demand from them a somewhat different kind of *shimenésre*, he is on a higher level.’<sup>7</sup>

Evident again in this example is the generic use of *mir*, and its interchangeability with the impersonal *me(n)*. The same *melámed* is quoted also in 15, in which he is speaking to a group of fathers, and discusses the delicate relations between fathers and *melámdim*.

- (15) der                    ersht-er                    yesód                    vos  
 DEF.NOM.M.SG   first-M.SG.NOM   foundation   what
- UNDZ**, eltern,    darf-n                    zakh  
 we    parents    have to.PRS-1pl   REFL
- misyákhes zay-n    tsu di            melámd-im,    iz            a(=az)  
 treat        be-INF to    DEF.PL teacher- PL    be.PRS.3sg    COMP
- mir**    darf-n                    vis-n            az            di  
 we    have to.PRS-1pl    know-INF    COMP    DEF.PL
- melámd-im    zayn-en            undzer-e    shlúkh-im ...  
 teacher-PL    be.PRS-3pl    our-PL        emissary-PL
- si    ken                    zay-n            az            der                    rébe  
 it    can.PRS.3sg    be-INF    COMP    DEF.NOM.M.SG    teacher
- o-t                    ge-to-n                    a            tóes ...            **UNDZ**  
 have.PRS-3sg    PTCP-do-PTCP    INDEF    mistake        we
- tu-en            teús-im            betúr    eltern, un    di            melámd-im  
 do.PRS-1pl    mistake-PL    as        parents and    DEF.PL    teacher-PL
- tu-en            eykh    teús-im            betúr    melámd-im.  
 do.PRS-3pl    also    mistake-PL    as        teacher-PL

‘The first principle that **WE**, parents, have to know when **we** relate to the teachers, is that the teachers are our representatives ... It is possible that the teacher made a mistake ... **WE** make mistakes as parents, and the teachers make mistakes as teachers.’

<sup>7</sup> The term is a Yiddishized version of Hebrew *shmone esrey* ‘eighteen’, to refer to the 18 blessings recited by Jews in the three daily prayers, the core of daily religious ritual and hence uttered with special devotion.



In 15, the *melámed* speaks as one of the parents (fathers), and not on behalf of the *melámdim*. He stresses this identification by use of the specific *undz*, which refers here to the group of parents (fathers), as opposed to the *melámdim*'s group.

The specific/generic distinction entailed by these two terms does not exist in Hasidic Yiddish, as can be seen in 16, taken from a sermon delivered in 1999 by a Hasidic woman.

- (16) **mir** zen-en          mentsh-n          vus          **indz** zen-en  
 we    be.PRS-1pl    human being-PL    REL    we    be.PRS-1pl
- bivkhíns                  beháyme-s.          **indz** farshstay-en  
 in\_the\_category\_of    head\_of\_cattle-PL    we    understand.PRS-1pl
- nisht far vus... **indz** of dei          velt    du    ze=mer  
 not    for what we    on DEM.F.SG world    here    be.PRS.1pl=we
- azoy vi    a          <sup>IH</sup>teatrón          bub-ót<sup>IH</sup>... **mir** zen-en          of  
 as    how INDF theatre.CNST doll-PL          we    be.PRS-1pl on
- dei          velt    vi    a          <sup>IH</sup>teatrón          bub-ót<sup>IH</sup>.  
 DEM.F.SG world    as    INDF theatre.CNST doll-PL

‘We are humans that [we] are like cattle. We don’t understand why. [= the reasons for what happens to us] ... we in this world here are like [puppets] in a puppet theatre ... we are in this world like [puppets] in a puppet theatre.’

## 6. Discussion.

In the sermon corpus, as well as in additional IHY material, speakers of Jerusalemite Yiddish use two different first-person plural pronouns in the nominative—*mir* used in generic sense and *undz* with a specific connotation. Note that this distinction is evident in the present study of a specific corpus—the sermons that served as its database. It may be assumed that while *undz* is always specific, it may occur in other sociolinguistic contexts as well, although possibly with different connotations. In the specific context of the sermons, *undz* is typically

used with an inclusive sense, thus serving to create a sense of intimacy that is vital to establishing a rapport between the sermon-givers and their audience.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to the sermons, in other contexts *undz* tends to be used in an exclusive rather than an inclusive sense. The pronoun *undz* remains specific, but it does not include the addressee, as in the following example, said by a Jerusalemite child to another boy, from a different Haredi group: “*undz redn vos, aykh redn vus*” ‘We say “vos” [= ‘what’], you say “vus”’—referring to one of the salient phonological features that distinguish the Jerusalemite Yiddish dialect, pronunciation as [o] of the historical vowel [ā] (both of Germanic and Semitic stock), vs. [u/ū] in other Yiddish dialects.<sup>9</sup> Here, the speaker uses the pronoun *undz* exclusively, since his addressee is not included in the Jerusalemite speech group, but it is still clearly specific in reference, referring to the specific group of Jerusalemite Yiddish speakers, and thus its basic function as a specific pronoun is maintained.

Unlike the highly specific *undz*, the pronoun *mir* is generic, it does not refer to any particular social group, and can usually be replaced by the impersonal pronoun *me(n)*. Over 95% of first-person plural pronouns occurring in the nominative in the corpus of Jerusalemite Yiddish took the form of *mir*.

In contrast, the pronoun *undz/indz* necessarily refers to a specific social group, generally as opposed to some other group, to express a relation of “us” vs. “them,” for example: (us) Jews vs. (them) people in general; (us) Haredi Jews vs. (them) non-Haredi Jews; (us) a specific group within the Haredi community vs. (them) other Haredi groups; (us) women vs. (them) men, and so on, most typically in referring to a group belonging to the Haredi inner circle. Of these two pronouns, *undz* is the more marked: its occurrences are rare, and its distribution limited. The

---

<sup>8</sup> See Cysouw 2005:219–220 on the use of the inclusive in order to express a bond between speaker and addressee. Mannheim (1982:450–451) presents an early linguistic description of the inclusive/exclusive distinction, recognized in the 16th century in reference to the Amerindian languages of Quechua and Aymara. This distinction was essential for the proper translation of Jesuit missionary material, including doctrine, catechisms, and sermons.

<sup>9</sup> The use of the oblique form of the nominative pronoun *aykh* may well be due to analogy with *undz*.

pronoun *mir* can be used for both meanings, specific and generic, whereas *undz* cannot refer to a generic “we.”

How and why did such a distinction arise? How did it come about that one pronominal form became specialized among some IHY speakers to refer to a specific social group? In addressing this question, the sociolinguistic context of IHY must be considered. The motivation underlying the introduction of this distinction derives from the importance of group membership and from the influence of the group on the individual in secluded Haredi communities, while the choice of the form “*undz*” is a result of the contact between Haredi Yiddish dialects in Israel.<sup>10</sup>

The contact between speakers of different IHY dialects resulted in bringing together the two dialectal forms of the nominative first-person plural pronoun: *mir* and *undz/indz*. Dialect contact led to dialectal mixing, to the point where not a single speaker in the recorded corpus used exclusively either *mir* or *undz/indz*. All speakers used both forms, but with one major difference. Among the speakers of Hasidic Yiddish the forms are in free variation, whereas among speakers of Jerusalemite Yiddish, there is a semantic distinction between the two forms.<sup>11</sup>

Speakers of Jerusalemite Yiddish, who were originally familiar only with the nominative pronoun *mir*, were exposed to the use of nominative *indz/undz* as a result of dialect contact in Israel, and this form has gradually penetrated their speech. The rarity of this form may have led to its marked status and semantic specialization in Jerusalemite Yiddish. Another factor in the development of the special meaning attributed to this pronoun may be the key phrase *ba undz* (compare French *chez nous*).

---

<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that the rise of the distinction between the two forms was the result of dialect contact, rather than of language contact, and cannot be attributed to the influence of Israeli Hebrew. Two first person plural pronouns exist in Israeli Hebrew: *anu* and *anakhnu*, and their use depends on language register: *anu* is used rarely, mainly in formal or high register contexts (and not as is mentioned in Helmbrecht 2002:38). There is no distinction similar to that of *mir/undz* in the pronominal system of Israeli Hebrew.

<sup>11</sup> The free variation in Hasidic Yiddish may be attributed to the number of alternative forms. Three variants appear in Hasidic Yiddish: *indz gayen* (amount of use varies considerably from one speaker to another: 35%–90%), *indz gaymer* (5%–50%), and *mir gayen* (5%–15%).

This phrase is used constantly by members of the speech community in reference to features of their unique group identity. For example, *ba undz geyt men a super* ‘we wear hats of the brand Super’, said by a Jerusalemite man, referring to hats worn only in his specific group; *ba undz makht men azoy* ‘we do it this way’, as opposed to the customs of other groups. This very common phrase reflects the essential place of group membership in the individual’s identity. Group membership is essential both externally, in comparison to the non-Haredi majority, and internally, compared to other Haredi groups.

Pronominal systems typically reflect basic social functions and distinctions in a given speech community (Mühlhäusler & Harré 1990). A particular social situation may play a role in the rise of societal distinctions in use of first-person plural pronouns. Characteristics of such a social situation are the existence of a minority group with a language of its own that is unintelligible to the majority; and/or the minority group feels alienated from the majority group which it perceives as culturally, religiously, or ethnically hostile; and/or the minority group has a unique identity that it seeks to maintain, sometimes by physically or otherwise distancing itself from the majority group.<sup>12</sup>

In the speech community under discussion, Yiddish is unintelligible not only to the majority group, but also to other minorities in its surroundings. Moreover, speakers of Haredi Yiddish have a distinct cultural, religious, and sociological identity, which they strive to maintain, going so far as to attribute sanctity to their language (Glinert & Shilhav

---

<sup>12</sup> Such situations have been identified in several places. A recent interesting development was described in Kapeliuk 2004:9–10. Kapeliuk showed that in some Neo-Aramaic dialects, where two forms of the first-person plural possessive pronoun exist (one of them is a suffix and the other a free form), one of these suffixes functions as an inclusive pronoun while the other is exclusive. These dialects are spoken by very small Christian or Jewish communities located inside large Muslim Arabic-speaking communities. The distinction between these pronouns is unknown in many other Neo-Aramaic dialects, nor does it exist in earlier dialects of Aramaic or the local Arabic dialects. Obviously, this is not a linguistic retention, but a new development, which reflects a sociological situation.

1991:78–81).<sup>13</sup> Moreover, speakers of Haredi Yiddish live in their own secluded homogeneous neighborhoods, and try to achieve minimal contact with speakers of the majority language. Not only does the Yiddish speech community seek to differentiate itself from the non-Yiddish speaking majority, it also deliberately highlights differences between groups within the Yiddish speech community.

In the Haredi speech community, group membership is the primary characteristic of one's identity, and the group controls many aspects of the life of the individual. The group determines its members' clothing, thus identifying them as members of that particular group, their education, their place of residence (as they live surrounded by other group members), their choice of a spouse, their ideological and political attitudes, and so forth.

In a community in which group membership is central to the definition of personal identity, the distinctions between “us” and “them” are extremely sharp and clear. Social boundaries are clearly defined, both externally (between Jews and non-Jews, or between Haredi Jews and other Jews) and internally (between different groups within the Haredi community). Gender boundaries also have a great significance in Haredi society, where men and women fulfill traditional gender roles, and spend most of their lives with members of their own gender. These basic social distinctions between different groups are mirrored linguistically by changes in the system of usage of the nominative pronoun *undz/indz* in Jerusalemite Yiddish.

#### REFERENCES

- Assouline, Dalit. Forthcoming. “They had not changed their language”—Haredi Yiddish in Israel. *Haredi society: From survival to establishment*, ed. by Kimi Kaplan & Nurit Stadler. Jerusalem: Van Leer. [in Hebrew]
- Cysouw, Michael. 2002. “We” rules: The impact of an inclusive/exclusive opposition on the paradigmatic structure of person marking. *Pronouns—grammar and representation*, ed. by Horst J. Simon & Heike Wiese, 41–62. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

---

<sup>13</sup> Glinert & Shilhav used the term “quasi-sanctity.” In recent fieldwork, speakers of Haredi Yiddish referred to their language as holier than Loshn-Koydesh (Assouline, forthcoming).

- Cysouw, Michael. 2005. A typology of honorific uses of clusivity. *Clusivity: Typology and case studies of the inclusive-exclusive distinction* (Typological studies in language. Clusivity: Typology and case studies of the inclusive-exclusive distinction), ed. by Elena Filimonova, 213–230. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Glinert, Lewis, & Yosseph Shilhav. 1991. Holy land, holy language: A study of an Ultraorthodox Jewish ideology. *Language in Society* 20. 59–86.
- Helmbrecht, Johannes. 2002. Grammar and function of “we.” *Us and others: Social identities across languages, discourses, and cultures*, ed. by Anna Duszak, 31–49. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Herzog, Marvin. 1965. *The Yiddish language in northern Poland: Its geography and history*. Bloomington: Indiana University.
- Isaacs, Miriam. 1998. Yiddish in the orthodox communities of Jerusalem. *Politics of Yiddish*, ed. by Dov-Ber Kerler, 85–96. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira.
- Isaacs, Miriam. 1999a. Haredi, Haymish, and Frim: Yiddish vitality and language choice in a transnational, multilingual community. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 138. 9–30.
- Isaacs, Miriam. 1999b. Contentious partners: Yiddish and Hebrew in Haredi Israel. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 138. 101–121.
- Kapeliuk, Olga. 2004. Some special functions of the adnominal pronouns in neo-Semitic. *Folia Orientalia* 40. 7–22.
- Mannheim, Bruce. 1982. A note on “inclusive/exclusive” in sixteenth century Peru. *International Journal of American Linguistics* 48. 450–459.
- Mühlhäusler, Peter, & Ron Harré. 1990. *Pronouns and people: The linguistic construction of social and personal identity*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Prilutski, Noyekh. 1924. *Mame Loshn—Yidishe Shprakhvisnshaftlekhe Forarbetn* (Yidishe dialektologishe forshungen, vol. 5). Warsaw: Kultur Lige.
- Weinreich, Max. 1980. *History of the Yiddish language*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Scholion – Interdisciplinary Center in Jewish Studies  
Faculty of Humanities, Rabin Building, Mount Scopus  
The Mandel Institute of Jewish Studies  
The Hebrew University  
Jerusalem 91905  
Israel  
[dalitassouline@gmail.com]