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Yiddish Intelligibility Retention Across The Jewish Diaspora: A Comparison Between Argentina and The U.S.

Shannon Rebecca Friel

Swarthmore College Class of 2024

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Acknowledgements	3
1.Introduction	4
2.Background	6
2.1 Yiddish: Origins, Survival, Decline	6
2.2 Ashkenazi Jewish Emigration to the U.S. and Argentina	10
2.2.1 Survival Through Code-switching	11
2.2.2 Yiddish in the U.S.	13
2.2.3 Yiddish in Argentina	15
2.3 Intelligibility Retention	18
2.3.1 Language Contact and Mutual Intelligibility	19
2.3.2 Who’s Your Grandma?: Phonetics	22
2.3.3 Semantic Shift and History	24
3 Methods	26
3.1 Participants	26
3.2 Data Collection	26
Table 1: Wordlist	29
3.3 Predictions	31
4.Results and Discussion	32
4.1 Results of the Perception Test	32
4.1.1 Question 1 and Individual Word Recognition	32
Table 2: Overall Responses to Question 1	33
4.1.2 Question 1 and Semantic Categories	35
Table 3: Response to Question 1 and Semantic Categories	36
4.1.3 Question 2 Responses	37
Table 4: Expected Sound vs Sound Heard	40
4.1.5 Notes from post-participation	41
4.2 Discussion	41
Chart 1: Overall intelligibility	42
4.2.1 What Happens Without Religious Words of Hebrew Origin?	43
Chart 2: Data without Religion and Food and Religion, Overall Recognition	44
4.2.2 Lexical gap	45
4.2.3 Semantic differences	46
4.2.4 Phonetic/Phonological intelligibility.	47
Table 5: IPA Chart for Yiddish based on Kleine (2003) and Dean-Olmstead & Skura (2017)	51
4.2.5 Listening to words in isolation	53
4.2.6 A Look At “D”	54
5. Concluding Remarks	55
6.Bibliography	58

Abstract

U.S. Ashkenazi Jews may call their grandma “bubbe” ([bubi]) in Yiddish, but in Argentina they usually call her “bobe” ([boʔe]). Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants brought Yiddish to the U.S. and Argentina, where the language was exposed to English and Spanish and Yiddish speakers lost touch with each other as they assimilated to different cultures far away from one another. This study attempts to answer whether English-Yiddish speakers can understand Yiddish words as produced by a Spanish-Yiddish speaker. U.S. participants completed a perception test, listening to a list of 20 words gathered from two Argentinian consultants and answering a series of questions on recognition, meaning of words, and phonetic differences. The study found that participants only recognized words 36.9% of the time, with Religious Hebrew-origin words and the word for “non-Jew” being the most recognizable. A detailed analysis of the words which were highly recognizable, moderately recognizable and those not recognized at all suggests that lexical and phonological differences are likely contributing to the loss in intelligibility.

Key words: Yiddish, Spanish, English, language contact, mutual intelligibility.

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Swarthmore is located on the traditional territory of the Lenape people, who we must strive to honor and support as part of our mission as a college in order to repair historical colonial harm.

“Yiddish has not yet said its last word. (...) Yiddish is the wise and humble language of us all, the idiom of frightened and hopeful Humanity.”

Isaac Bashevis Singer, Nobel Laureate (1978)

1. Introduction

Yiddish has always been the language of my home. I grew up speaking Rio-Platense Spanish and English in a predominantly secular Ashkenazi Jewish family in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Yiddish has always been present in my family, even though nobody could articulate more than two whole sentences. But, sprinkling Yiddish expressions during Sunday family *meriendas*¹ always made gatherings more fun.

When I first moved from Argentina to the United States, I noticed it was hard for me to understand Yiddish words as produced by my U.S. peers. In a conversation about Judaism with an American Ashkenazi Jewish friend, she mentioned her “bubbe” ([bubi]) had sent her chocolate. As someone who grew up in a Spanish-Yiddish-speaking household, I scratched my head. The two words I grew up hearing for “grandma” were *babe* ([βaβe]- Polish-Argentinian Yiddish) and *bobe* ([βoβe]- Lithuanian-Argentinean Yiddish). Then, I heard “chutzpah” ([xʊtspʰə]), a Yiddish word I had never encountered but that seemed frequently used in the U.S. I realized that the Yiddish I spoke and the Yiddish I was hearing didn’t match. Therefore, I decided to investigate whether it is possible to affirm that Yiddish has lost mutual intelligibility between its varieties in Argentina and in the United States. The research question that will drive this investigation is “Can English-Yiddish speakers understand Yiddish words as produced by a Spanish-Yiddish speaker?”

For this research, I conducted phonetic/phonological recognition tests. I asked 8 English-Yiddish-speaking participants to listen to 20 Yiddish words produced by an Argentinian Spanish speaker. They answered a series of questions after listening to each word to determine

¹ Argentinian 5 o’clock tea.

recognition, comprehension, semantic differences, and phonetic differences as detected by the participants.

I began investigating this phenomenon for Sociolinguistics II at Swarthmore College. I wanted to examine if the mutual intelligibility of Yiddish among speakers from hispanophone and anglophone contexts had decreased. I conducted a pilot study to see if an Argentinian Spanish-Yiddish speaker could recognize Yiddish words as produced by an English speaker. The Argentinian participant was asked to listen to a list of 20 English-Yiddish words and answer whether they could recognize them. If there was recognition, I asked them what felt different. The results of this pilot study showed that the question “Can Spanish-Yiddish speakers understand Yiddish words as produced by an English-Yiddish speaker?” cannot be answered with a firm “yes” or “no” (Friel, 2023). However, in that study, the Spanish-speaking participant was 85 years old and grew up with parents who spoke Yiddish fluently. This is not the case for most Yiddish speakers today. Therefore, for this thesis, when answering the question “Can English-Yiddish speakers understand Yiddish as produced by a Spanish-Yiddish speaker?”, I decided to work with younger participants to represent the current situation with Yiddish accurately.

Today, Yiddish is considered to be a “definitely endangered” language by UNESCO because children no longer learn it at home (Evans, 2011). Most monolingual speakers of Yiddish are either elder Eastern-European Jews or in isolated Ultra-Orthodox communities (Glaser, 2008). Second, third, and fourth-generation Argentinian, American, and other diaspora Ashkenazim have preserved Yiddish through code-switching words and phrases with the local languages of our countries. For the purposes of this study, we will refer to U.S. Ashkenazim as

English-Yiddish speakers. Argentinian Ashkenazim who use Yiddish words will be referred to as Spanish-Yiddish speakers.

The United States has the largest Jewish population in the world (McEvoy, 2023). Argentina has the fifth largest Jewish population in the world (McEvoy, 2023). Yet, Latin American Jews have been ignored in Jewish historical, cultural, and linguistic studies (Baker, 2020; Dean-Olmstead & Skura, 2017). Besides, Jews in Latin America and in the U.S. come from diverse ethnic groups and some have origins outside Central and Eastern Europe. For example, the Sephardim or Iberian-origin Jews fled the Inquisition and arrived on the American continent as Spain encroached on Indigenous territory (Lehmann, 2008). Many of the Sephardim exiles practiced Judaism in secret, earning the name “Crypto-Jew” (Kunin, 2009). Another important group that immigrated to the American continent is the Mizrahim or Middle-Eastern and North African-origin Jews (not including the Sephardim who fled to the region after 1478) (Gottesman, 1985). The Jewish diaspora also includes other groups such as Ethiopian, Chinese, Greek, Uzbek, and other Jews (Kaplan & Rosen, 1994; Kramer Jr., 1956; Bowman, 1986; Burton, 1994). For the purposes of the research, I will focus specifically on the Ashkenazim and their language, Yiddish.

2. Background

2.1 Yiddish: Origins, Survival, And Decline

Defining a language is inherently political. For example, sign languages and Creoles were not considered languages (Börstell, 2023). Likewise, Yiddish has long not been defined as a language in its own right. The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, the leading academic

institution on Yiddish in the world, states on its website that “*Yiddish, however, is not a dialect of German but a complete language, one of a family of Western Germanic languages, that includes English, Dutch, and Afrikaans*” (*Learning Yiddish*, n.d.). Max Weinreich, the co-founder of YIVO, is also known for his work surrounding dialects, languages, and Yiddish. Weinreich infamously criticized the arbitrary nature of the classification of languages with the phrase “a shprakh iz a dyalekt mit an armey un flot²” (Raines, 2022). Yiddish transcended from being a language's name to becoming a synonym for Ashkenazi culture. Its status mirrored that of the Jewish people who spoke it.

Kerler (1993) characterizes Yiddish as a “fusion” or “mixture” language. Yiddish has two sides to it: a “temporal” and a “territorial” one (Dovid Katz, as cited by Kerler, 1993). The “temporal” aspect refers to the influence of Hebrew and Aramaic as languages from the past in the Levant. The “territorial” describes the presence of German due to their location in Central and Eastern Europe. In Eastern Europe specifically, Yiddish receives significant input from Slavic languages (Kerler, 1993). Max Weinreich (1959) puts it “The history of Yiddish, as we shall see, testifies to strong and incessant contacts between the Jews and different non-Jewish groups.” Weinreich (1959) argues that the origin of Yiddish is the combination of the Laaz language, spoken by Jews in Northern Italy and France that moved to the Middle-Rhine region (Germany), the local language, and Hebrew. According to this interpretation, Yiddish’s Slavic component became a part of the language as Jewish people migrated further East. Yiddish’s history is reflected in its vocabulary. For example, the word for “sun,” “zun,” is of Germanic origin (Katz, 1986). Yet, the words for “moon,” “levone,” and “probably,” “mistame,” have origins in Hebrew and Aramaic respectively (Katz, 1986). Then, the word “khasmen(en),” “to

² Translation; A language is a dialect with an army and navy

sign,” is the combination of a Semitic origin word with a Germanic ending (Katz, 1986). The Yiddish word for “herring,” “syelyodke” (Rothstein, 2001) is of Slavic origin.

Rabbis have recorded Yiddish dialectology studies as far back as the XVII century A.D. According to Katz (1988), rabbis drew a line between Western and Eastern Yiddish. The first variety coincides territorially with Germany, while the second coincides with the east of the Danube River. Yet, the history of Yiddish dialectology studies is tainted by a Westernized analysis that glorifies Germany. Katz (1988) points out how “the father of Yiddish linguistics,” Johannes Buxtorf, considered Western Yiddish in Germany as “more correct” given its closer proximity to the German language. Uriel Weinreich³ (1962) breaks down these two categories into further subcategories and includes Southern Europe as a separate dialect category. Even though political borders constantly shifted, communities were just a few miles away from each other, maintaining intelligibility.

Despite persevering for nearly a millennium in Europe, Yiddish had a rapid decline in Europe in the late XIX and XX centuries. Specific events, such as pogroms, immigration, and the Holocaust (Davis, 1987) contributed to the fall in Yiddish use. But, this decline was also a result of two processes of diglossia. The first one transpired in Central and Eastern Europe prior to the mass emigration of Jews and World War II. The second one occurred as a consequence of the creation of the Zionist movement and the creation of the state of Israel.

Diglossia is a dynamic between two languages or varieties that have a complementary distribution in the same space (Sayahi 2019; Ferguson, 1959). There is usually a standardized high language (H) and a low language (L). The former is used for government, education, and other institutional domains while the latter is used for daily communication, within the family, or in other informal domains of interaction. In Central and Eastern Europe, Yiddish was in

³ Uriel Weinreich was the son of YIVO founder Max Weinreich.

exoglossic (different language) diglossic dynamics with local languages such as Russian, German, Hungarian. Yiddish was the L in each case of language contact situations due to social stigma and institutional discrimination against the Jewish people. Even though diglossia is considered to be stable and does not lead to the loss of a language or variety, in the case of Yiddish it proved to be a lethal blow over time, both in Europe and in the Americas. In Europe, for example, in XIX-century Hungary, Yiddish was pushed to the side to embrace German to assimilate into Austro-Hungarian society. As Szonja Komoróczy explains “(...) alongside reforms in liturgy, synagogue architecture, and the rabbis’ apparel, the switch from Yiddish to German as the language of sermons was one of the most significant changes in the religious domain introduced by the reformers at the time” (Komoróczy, 2018). The same phenomenon later occurred with the Hungarian language in the second half of the XIX century (Komoróczy, 2018). However, Yiddish remained a language of the home and survived in the Hungarian context through trilingual code-switching.

The other battle Yiddish had to face was Zionism and the rise of Hebrew. When Zionism emerged in Central and Eastern Europe in the XIX century, language became a way to identify those who supported the creation of a Jewish State in historic Palestine and those who didn’t. Zionists wanted to pull Hebrew out of its sphere of sacrality and incorporate it into daily life. Socialists and Orthodox Jews who rejected the creation of the state of Israel responded by speaking and affirming Yiddish. The ideological and linguistic battle between the “Yiddishists” and the “Hebrewists” (Davis, 1987) would later become a decisive factor in the decrease in the use of Yiddish, especially after the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. Yiddish would become trapped in a new diglossic dynamic with Hebrew as the new H language. This dynamic was not

exclusive to Israel, as Ashkenazi Jewish cultural and religious institutions abroad distanced themselves from Yiddish to align themselves with Zionism.

All of these factors affect the vitality and social status of the language. Given Yiddish's forced erosion, today L1 speakers are in their 90s or in isolated Orthodox communities. Despite the historical adversity Yiddish faced, it is alive in code-switching in large part thanks to Ashkenazi immigration to the American continent.

2.2 Ashkenazi Jewish Emigration to the U.S. and Argentina

Poverty, pogroms, institutional discrimination, and genocide led Ashkenazi Jewish people to flee their homes in Central and Eastern Europe. Immigration to the American continent occurred in multiple waves. The first arrivals occurred in the 1850s when Jews from Germany immigrated mainly to the United States. The second wave took place between 1880 and 1920. This time, the majority of immigrants came from Eastern Europe (Dorozhkin, 1969). The majority of Jews in Argentina are descendants of the influx of Eastern Europeans at this time (Fischman, 2011). After the Holocaust, in the 1970s, and in the years before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, many Jews immigrated to the American continent.

Both Buenos Aires and East Coast U.S. cities like New York became centers of Yiddish culture. Yiddish served as a lingua franca among the Ashkenazi Jewish diaspora in the first half of the XX century. Historical records show cultural exchanges through Yiddish amongst Latin American, U.S., and Eastern European Jews through literature, music, theaters, politics, and newspapers (Perego, 2022). For example, Yiddish authors such as the Polish Melech Ravitch would tour around Latin America and be hosted by Jewish community organizations (Perego,

2022). Other authors lived in Europe, Argentina, and the U.S., including poet and playwright Leib Malach (Perego, 2022).

However, Yiddish lost its lingua franca status as the number of speakers declined, disconnecting Ashkenazi Jews from each other. The Holocaust was a particularly hard blow to the Yiddish-speaking population not only in Europe but in the American continent as well. Immigrants did not want to be associated with the horrors of the genocide in Europe, so many stopped speaking Yiddish. Yet, antisemitism and fear of speaking Yiddish in public wasn't the only reason for the decline of its use. Self-identification with the countries they immigrated to also led to a loss of the language of the shtetl (Fischman, 2011).

2.2.1 Survival Through Code-switching

Gardner-Chloros (2009) defines code-switching⁴ as varied combinations of two or more linguistic varieties, languages or dialects, in the same utterance. Gardner-Chloros (2009) highlights the prevalence of “mixed speech” especially among bilingual communities and particularly among first generation immigrants and their descendants.

Code-switching is in Yiddish's soul. Writer Shmuel Niger suggested that “code-switching—moving back and forth between one language and another—constitutes a definitional Jewish activity” (Shmuel Niger, as cited by Shandler, 2005). After all, Yiddish has always lived with other languages and not always in the best terms, as explained in section 2.1. Back in Central and Eastern Europe, Yiddish had two ways of approaching code-switching. On one hand, there was a methodical and explicit approach to code-switching, such as reading bilingual prayer books in Hebrew and Yiddish. On the other hand, a more “free” multilingual

⁴ In the literature, code-switching can be found as “code switching,” “codewitching” or “code-switching.” For consistency purposes, I will be using the latter version.

speech was also a part of Jewish life. For example, it was very common for Jews to make jokes or songs in both Yiddish and German, Russian, Ukrainian, and other languages (Shandler, 2005). Both styles of code-switching are heavily reflected in Jewish literature, but especially the latter. The literary genre of “anecdotes” or short comedic stories includes code-switching between Yiddish, Russian, and Ukrainian, with Sholem Aleichem being a reference in this field. On the music scene, the genre *blatnaya pesnya* (criminal song) originated in Odessa, where, at its peak 40% of its inhabitants were Jewish. These songs described the harsh realities of poverty, crime, and prison. They were written in Russian, Ukrainian, and Yiddish and contained heavy code-switching between these languages (Rothstein, 2001).

Despite falling in overall use, code-switching and verbal art became Yiddish’s way of surviving in the U.S. and Argentina. Even though American Jews were trying to banish Yiddish words and phrases from their English vocabulary to integrate into U.S. society, there was a simultaneous effort to use a mixture of these two languages to create fun, useful, and vivid descriptions unique to their experience in their speech. This dialect became known as “Yinglish,” “Judeo-English,” and “Yiddish-Americanese”(Goldstein, 2020). As for Argentina, University of Buenos Aires professor Fernando Fischman describes the same pattern: “(...) among second-generation Argentine Jews and subsequent generations, Yiddish gained a new life in an indivisible combination with Spanish” (Fischman, 2011).

In the digital age, Yiddish has found a new way of surviving: TikTok. “#yiddishtok” became a space for Yiddishists to gather and share Yiddish words, the history of the language, and Ashkenazi culture thanks to the app’s ventriloquist videos and algorithm. Ramati and Abeliovich (2022) explain, “TikTok’s unique sound–image structure facilitates the dissemination of Yiddish between users’ bodies, who, when connecting into a chain of body–voice

configurations, transform the platform into a virtual space for the deterritorialized post-vernacular language.” The “ #yiddishtoks” have also become a space for expressions of intersectionality among modern Yiddishists. For example, non-binary Yiddish Tokers popularized a remix of the sigh “Oy Vey” into “Oy *They*.” Digital age Yiddishists continue to use code-switching to bring Yiddish to -predominantly- Gen-Z audiences by taking advantage of TikTok’s easily digestible format, and revitalizing the use of the language and culture. The literature primarily focuses on Yiddishist content creators code-switching in their TikToks between English and Yiddish (Ramati & Abeliovich, 2022). However, future studies should investigate whether this phenomenon is occurring for hispanophone audiences.

2.2.2 Yiddish in the U.S.

Ellis Island was the gate to the U.S. to German and Eastern European Jews. Reception was not always warm, as Jews were associated with diseases such as Favus. Yet 2.5 million Ashkenazim entered the U.S. until 1924 (Tevis, 2016), with New York City being the home to half of the country’s Ashkenazi population (Dorozhkin, 1969).

According to Milton Dorozhkin (1969), Eastern European Jews who came in the 1880s didn’t fit in culturally or religiously with the German Ashkenazim that immigrated in the 1850s nor with the already established Sephardim (Spanish-Portuguese) Jewery. The new immigrants clung on to Yiddish to form a community and guarantee each other's survival. They formed “landsmannschaften” or societies where immigrants from the same area would guarantee mutual aid and tie their community back to the old world of shtetls⁵. Despite differences between dialects, Yiddish also served as a lingua franca between different groups within the broader diaspora, including the “Litvak” (Lithuanians), “Galitzianer” (Galitzians), “Poilishcher” (Polish),

⁵ Predominantly Jewish villages in Eastern Europe.

“Ukrainer” (Ukrainian), among others. The common language and the immigration of Eastern European Jewish intelligentsia into America led to the birth of a local “Yiddisch Kultur” (Jewish/Yiddish culture). Sholem Aleichem, the “Yiddish Mark Twain,” was among the literary giants of Ashkenazi literature who immigrated to the U.S. When Aleichem died, over 100,000 mourners poured into the streets of New York City (Haley, 2016). It still is the largest funeral New York has ever had.

Yiddish became the language of resistance to “Americanization,” especially in New York City, where Yiddish was spoken more than anywhere in the world. Yiddish art, including professional and amateur theater, music, poetry, and literature bloomed in the Big Apple (Dorozhkin, 1969). Singers included Sophie Tucker and the Barry Sisters. Writers included Isaac Bashevis Singer. **According to Dorozhkin (1969), the Yiddish press was the language’s lifeline. At its peak in the early XX century, there were 150 different publications in Yiddish, including newspapers, magazines, and other periodicals in circulation.**

Most immigrants worked in the textile or other industries, heavily relying on their Yiddish to communicate with other workers. Dorozhkin (1969) describes how the “whitecollarization” and greater social stability of Jewish people lead to a decline in the use of Yiddish and the closing of its lifelines: theaters and newspapers. **In a span of decades, the U.S., Jewish people became dissociated from Yiddish to “Americanize” (Basu, 2014).** Sol Steinmetz (2001) explains that the initially thriving Yiddish arts and press waxed poetic about the “American experience” (Steinmetz, 2001). **However, this infatuation further accelerated the process of assimilation and loss of the Yiddish language and culture in the United States. Pressures to fit into Protestant whiteness also influenced a drop in Yiddish usage,**

particularly for the second-generation Ashkenazim in the United States. As Goldstein (2020) explains, it “hastened the move among Jews toward a thoroughgoing linguistic acculturation.” **Another important fact is that American Ashkenazi people who wanted to stay connected with their Jewish heritage overwhelmingly chose Hebrew over Yiddish (Goldstein, 2020).**

In conclusion, in the United States, Yiddish bloomed not only thanks to mutual aid societies and intellectuals moving here, but also thanks to New York becoming the largest Yiddish-speaking city in the world. Despite assimilation and the rise of Hebrew, Yiddish idioms became a part of English and English a part of Yiddish (Steinmetz, 1981) -particularly the formation of New York English (Brinn et al., 2021) and even among the non-Jews (Feinsilver, 1962).

2.2.3 Yiddish in Argentina

In Argentina, Jewish immigrants’ relationships with Yiddish depended on where they were geographically and socially located. In rural areas, Jewish Immigrants embraced the “gaucho” -horseman- identity. However, since many of them were in Jewish Colonies⁶, they retained Yiddish. Even non-Jewish neighbors began adopting some Yiddish. On the other hand, urban Ashkenazi Jews who emigrated as adults and were poorer tended to speak Yiddish. As many Ashkenazi people became middle class and more “porteño,”⁷ they adopted Spanish to leave behind a language they considered to be “of poor people” (Nouwen, 2013).

The “conventillos” are crucial to understanding the integration of immigrants in Argentina in the late XIX and early XX century. “Conventillos” were old colonial mansions that

⁶ Agricultural land settlements built on land stolen by the Argentine government from Indigenous communities.

⁷ Autonomous City of Buenos Aires native.

used to be owned by Argentine elites but were abandoned during the Yellow Fever epidemic in 1871. In the late 19th century, individual rooms were rented to entire families or groups of men of low-income European (e.g., Italian, Spanish, Russian) or Middle-Eastern (e.g., Turkish, Sirio-Lebanese) immigrant backgrounds (Crevino, 2016). Each “conventillo” had an inner courtyard. This space became crucial for immigrants of all backgrounds to interact with each other and preserve their language with immigrants from the same area. This unique space led to the creation of a new linguistic identity: “El Lunfardo.” It is a unique Argentine mix of foreign languages with Castilian Spanish usually used in ludic or informal contexts. Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants lived in these spaces and interacted with their non-Jewish neighbors in the courtyard, mixing their languages with Spanish to communicate (Meadvin, 2017). Researcher Andrea Bohrn explains that while Italian has the biggest footprint on “Lunfardo” due to the large percentage of Italo-Argentines in the country, “castídish” (Castilian-Yiddish) has had a very significant influence as well despite the relatively smaller Ashkenazi Jewish population (Bohrn, 2020).

In her analysis of the novel “Der Hoyf on Fenster” (The Courtyard without Windows) by Ukrainian-Argentinian writer Mimi Pinzón, Meadvin (2017) focuses on how the main character’s journey of adapting to Argentine society is related to the evolution of Yiddish in the country. Etl, a little Jewish girl growing up in a conventillo is a reflection of Adela Weinstein-Shliapochnik (Mimi Pinzón) and her own story. Etl is force-fed the “indoctrination of *próceres* (national heroes)” at school, which not only attempts to indoctrinate her into Argentina’s racist standards of “civilization,” but also invisibilizes her experience as an immigrant. She turns to books in Yiddish for comfort, but she is shunned by her peers in school. She also witnesses the brutality of the police and the antisemitic ultranationalist militia *La Liga*

Patriotica against Jews. There is a significant moment in the novel where Etl's conventillo is raided after nationwide workers' strikes known as *La Semana Trágica* (the tragic week) and a soldier grabs her father's book in Yiddish, holding it upside down without knowing. The soldier questions her father on the language of the book but becomes startled by the response that it is in Yiddish. This man didn't know what Yiddish was, so Etl's father repeats that it is in Hebrew. He stands up to the soldier using his Yiddish book, which reflects Mimi Pinzón's "deployment of Yiddish as her anti-nationalist language" (Meadvin, 2017).

Pinzón was not alone in this sentiment, as Jewish socialists and communists in Argentina turned to Yiddish and the ICUF (Idisher Cultur Farband), a political and cultural institution that was part of a larger international network of progressive Jews (Yiddisher Kultur Fabrand) (Visacovsky, 2017). At its peak, ICUF opened 15 "shules" ("schools" in Spanish-Yiddish) that taught Yiddish to over 2500 students (Visacovsky, 2017).

Despite efforts to preserve Yiddish, the process of adaptation that Etl lived through was a fatal blow to the Yiddish-speaking community. Alejandro Dujovne (2018) explains that the decline of Yiddish culture and language was due to the adoption of the local language to integrate and also due to a general loss of interest among younger generations of Argentine Jews. *Yiddischer* schools and newspapers began to close in the 1950s in Argentina, leading to a drastic drop in speakers of the language.

Political relationships with Israel and the USSR also accelerated the decline of Yiddish. Zionism claimed Hebrew as the national language for Jewish people and disenfranchised Yiddish (Dujovne, 2018). On the other hand, the socialist Yiddish culture center ICUF stopped speaking the language to strengthen ties to the Soviet Union (Baker, 2020; Visacovsky, 2017). A study by the Argentine research institute CONICET revealed that only 10% of the generation of

Ashkenazi people born in 1940 in Argentina spoke Yiddish “full time” and 50% were considered “partial speakers” (Scherlis, 2022).

Yet, Ashkenazi Jews “invented” a Spanish-language Jewish culture (Dujovne, 2018), and Yiddish was a large component of it. For example, Susana Skura and Evelyn Dean-Olmstead (2017) describe how Yiddish L1 speakers would pronounce the diphthong -ue (/ue/) as /oi/. The classic example would be the Yiddisher pronunciation of [buenos] (good) as [voioṣ] (Dean-Olmstead & Skura, 2017), which became a stereotype of Argentinian Ashkenazi Jews.

The formation of a progressive, local, and distinct Yiddish culture, along with the embracing of Spanish is likely to lead to a decrease in common ground with US Yiddish. Just by looking at the difference between how Argentinians (and other Latin American) (Visacovsky, 2017) cultures transliterated “Yiddisher Kultur Farband” into “Idisher Cultur Fabrand,” it is visible that language contact with Spanish influenced Yiddish early on in Argentina.

2.3 Intelligibility Retention

Mutual intelligibility is the level of understanding between two interlocutors of two different languages or language varieties where they don’t have difficulty recognizing each others’ speech or notice little variation (Karam, 2000)⁸. There are multiple ways humans can understand a different language (Van Heuven, 2009). In spoken and written languages, there can be phonetic/phonological, written, and lexical intelligibility (Ciobanu and Dinu, 2014). Not all these types of intelligibility are shared between two languages. For example, Yiddish and German can be mutually understood phonetically and lexically (Friedland et al., 2022). However, both use different writing systems. German uses the Latin alphabet while Yiddish has a Hebrew

⁸ In one of his examples, Karam uses the word “Eskimo” to refer to the Inuit community of Canada. It is important to note that that term is problematic and I, as a researcher, do not condone its use.

one. Therefore, they cannot be mutually understood in written form. Previous studies have shown that intelligibility also exists in signed form for signed languages (Sáfár et al., 2015). However, this specific type of intelligibility will not be tested for this study. The main aspects that will be tested are phonetic/phonological and lexical intelligibility. Previous studies have defined *comprehensibility* as the listener's opinion of how well a speaker or utterance can be understood (Gooskens & Van Heuven, 2021).

Factors influencing intelligibility include cultural exposure (Gooskens et al., 2015), linguistic differences such as phonetic and lexical distance, geographical distance, and language attitude (Gooskens & Schneider, 2019). Intelligibility relationships aren't always symmetrical. Gooskens and Van Heuven (2021) gave an example of how Estonians could understand Ukrainian given its mutual intelligibility with Russian, a language they learned in school. However, Ukrainians cannot understand Estonian because of the distance between the Finno-Ugric language and Russian and their lack of exposure to Estonia's national language.

The *speech chain* (Gooskens & Van Heuven, 2021) is an essential component of phonetic/phonological and lexical intelligibility. The first part of this sequence begins when a speaker utters a sequence of sounds, and a listener, who is familiar with them, can recognize them in the same order. This phenomenon is known as *speech recognition*. If a sufficient number of units have been recognized in the same order, this is called *speech understanding* or *comprehension* (Gooskens & Van Heuven, 2021).

2.3.1 Language Contact and Mutual Intelligibility

Languages came into contact with each other for a variety of reasons, including war (Marco & Thomas, 2019), colonialism (Perez & Sippola, 2021), slavery, voluntary and forced

migration, and geographical proximity and co-territoriality (Sankoff, 2004). Sankoff (2004) explains that the circumstances in which language contact occurs shape the way languages influence each other. Long-term exposure to each other, as in the case of Yiddish with Slavic languages, produces different outcomes in both languages than short-term contact. In the case of Spanish and English in the American continent with Yiddish, contact was short-term since the language of the Ashkenazim was already suffering a decline in speakers during the migration period to America. Within a generation, many either turned to Hebrew or they Americanized or “se argentinizaron.”⁹ Even though the contact was short, there was significant input from Yiddish into the Spanish and English languages and the Argentinian and American cultures.

Uriel Weinreich, one of the linguists considered a pioneer in the field of language contact studies, first defined this phenomenon as *interference*. According to this interpretation, **two languages come into contact through “the bilingual.” Then, as Weinreich and Martinet explain, new rearrangements or patterns come about as a result of “ the introduction of foreign elements into the more highly structured domains of language, such as the bulk of the phonemic system, a large part of the morphology and syntax, and some areas of the vocabulary (kinship, color, weather, etc.)” (Weinreich & Martinet, 1979). Even though Yiddish has always been an L language in diglossia with other H languages (see section 2.1), as we will see in the following sections, *transfer* did not occur unidirectionally from the hegemonic language of the land to Yiddish. Yiddish also had an influence on other languages, especially with the use of Yiddish words in code-switching (Sankoff, 2004).**

Language can be affected by contact at all levels and in situations of contact there is a *source language* and *recipient language* (Thomason and Kaufman, 1988; Van Coetsem, 1988). Which tongue will be *recipient* or *source* language, will depend on the angle of analysis. From an

⁹ They became Argentinian.

Ashkenazi Jewish point of view, English and Spanish would be their *recipient language*, while Yiddish would be the *source language*. First generation immigrants tend to transfer their phonology from their *source language* into the *recipient* one (Lee, 2001). However, with rapid language shift and diminishing contact, there is no long-term effect of the immigrant phonology. This is especially in the third and fourth generations, who tend to be monolingual in the *recipient* language. If we switch the angle of analysis from the immigrants to the locals, native phonological patterns tend to influence how foreign lexical items are uttered, as shown in the study by Pereira (1977) on the phonological adaptation of English words into Brazilian Portuguese. However, according to Sankoff (2004), some foreign pronunciations are retained in the pronunciation of loan words or *borrowings*. Given that the third and fourth generation descendants of Ashkenazi Jews now identify as U.S. Americans and Argentinians and that their L1¹⁰ is the *recipient language* of their ancestors, the question becomes: have phonological influences from Spanish and English influenced Yiddish such that there has been a loss in Yiddish intelligibility? Has Yiddish retained its original forms, including its phonology?

Interestingly, Sankoff (1984) mentions “toches” and “meshuggeh” in her textbook chapter. Let’s focus on “toches.” In the online English-Yiddish dictionary by the University of Kentucky, “toches,” which means “buttock”, appears as “tokhes” (*Yiddish Dictionary Lookup*, n.d.). In the Jewish English Lexicon, another online dictionary, this word appears as “tuches” (*Home - Jewish English Lexicon*, n.d.). I must note that the latter version is the one I have encountered the most. This variation shows that lexical and phonological borrowings are intertwined and variable themselves. Furthermore, there is the issue of transliteration and transcription. Yiddish was traditionally written in the Hebrew alphabet. Both English and Spanish are written in the Latin alphabet with their own varieties and orthography conventions.

¹⁰ Native language.

Saadane et al. (2012) in their study of transliterations and transcriptions from Arabic, show how the language that Arabic words are translated into and the original dialect of these words not only affect the way words are transcribed but also how the variety in transcriptions and transliterations can lead to confusion in looking for Arabic words, especially names. Given the similarity in circumstances, it is possible to suspect that the same scenario may occur in the transcription and transliteration of Yiddish words and that intelligibility may be lost in transliteration, transcription, and phonological contact.

Francis X. Karam (2000) notes that a shared structural similarity of language form increases the tendency for mutual intelligibility. However, physical proximity is also key for maintaining intelligibility. Another important factor to consider is that Karam (2000) emphasizes that the Sapirian concept of community consensus is also key for maintaining intelligibility. The familiarity that is shaped by community norms also generates an *area of acceptable variation* in which mutual intelligibility occurs. Speech that deviates from accepted norms but is still recognizable is considered intelligible (Karam, 2000). Given the loss of community consensus on the Yiddish language because of the geographical barriers between the Argentinian and the U.S. Ashkenazi communities, following the analysis by Karam (2000), it is possible to hypothesize that Yiddish has lost mutual intelligibility. The question becomes: have the phonological and lexical influences as explained by Stankoff (2004) led the Yiddish dialects to mismatch their *area of acceptable variation*?

2.3.2 Who's Your Grandma?: Phonetics

As I mentioned in the introduction, one of the main examples which illustrates the difference between Spanish-Yiddish and English-Yiddish is in the affective word for

“grandmother.” As previously mentioned in the introduction, Argentinian Ashkenazim call their grandmas *babe* ([βaβe]-Polish-Argentinian Yiddish) or *bobe* ([βoβe]- Lithuanian-Argentinean Yiddish), while U.S. Americans say *bubbe* ([bobi]). In written form, they seem similar enough, but there are many phonetic differences underneath the surface. The Argentinian varieties use a bilabial fricative, [β], while the U.S. varieties use a bilabial plosive, [b]. However, it’s worth noting that both Spanish and English have [b] in their phonetic inventories while only Spanish has the [β] (Coloma, 2018; Whitley, 2003). Then, there are the vowels. In Argentina’s case, [bobe] is the predominant variety used for grandma. When compared to the English *bubbe*, there seems to be a difference with respect to the roundness of the vowel and a slight difference in height.

Then there is the pair *mishiguene* ([miʃigene], Spanish-Yiddish) and *messugane* ([məʃʊgane], English-Yiddish). Both seem quite different in written form and have very different pronunciations. The Spanish-Yiddish version has more frontal vowels than the English-Yiddish version. However, in this case unlike that of “Bobe”/“Bubbe”, we can see that all consonants are the same.

A similar phenomenon occurs with the Spanish-Yiddish “Potz” ([pots̃]) and its English-Yiddish counterpart “Putz” ([pʊts̃]). The Spanish version has a more mid-closed and slightly further back vowel.

Given the differences in pronunciation in all three words, It would be interesting to see whether the difference in vowels and consonants can affect intelligibility. As results will show in Section 4, phonetic differences do affect intelligibility (Gooskens & Schneider, 2019; Karam, 2000).

2.3.3 Semantic Shift and History

Fischman (2011) and Kerner (2022) point out that Ashkenazi Jews in Argentina used Yiddish terms to differentiate themselves from other marginalized groups to fit into the narrative of a “white” country (Edwards, 2020). An example of this is how Italians were called “lokshn” (pasta) (Fischman, 2011) at a time when they were marginalized in Argentina. Another example, which still produces harm to this day, is the word “shikseh”. In Argentina, this word is considered a racist and classist slur that means “non-Jewish maid.” However, in the United States, “shiksa” has a different connotation. A “shiksa goddess” often refers to a white blond woman who is a “sexual escape” for a Jewish man (Unreich, 2018). In fact, in the musical “The last five years”, the main character sings a song called “shiksa goddess”, to celebrate not having to sleep with a Jewish woman. In Eastern Europe, this word only meant “non-Jewish woman.” This concept also mutated in Spanish-Yiddish since the term “shiksero” in Spanish-Yiddish means a man who dates non-Jewish women (Dean-Olmstead & Skura, 2017).

The “shikseh/shiksa” pair is not the only one to change meaning with a new social context. During the pilot study (Friel, 2023), I found that there was a drastic difference in meaning between the Spanish and English-Yiddish versions of “Schmuck”, “Chutzpah” and “Yenta.” According to the Argentinian participant of that study, “Chutzpah” was a wedding. In English-Yiddish, this word means “audacity, courage, guts.” In the case of “schmuck,” the participant said it could mean either “the taste of something” or it could mean “stupid,” with the latter being the same as the English-Yiddish. In this specific case. It is highly likely that the participant confused “schmuck” with “schmecken,” both a German and Yiddish word for

“taste.”¹¹ Then, there is the case of “Yenta.” The Spanish-Yiddish-speaking participant said that was a Yiddish name for women. Yet, in the U.S. this word means “gossip” (Friel, 2023).

After further research, I found that “Yenta” in the U.S. is associated with misogynistic and antisemitic tropes within the Jewish community as well as outside of it. Clementi (2013) analyzes Jewish comic artist Aline Kominsky Crumb’s graphic autobiography. In these comic strips, Kominsky Crumb addresses her own Jewish identity and Jewish characters around her, including the “Yenta.” Clementi defines “Yenta” as “the Jewish woman is the Yenta, the wife of the Yid. She has poor yet expensive tastes: she over-accessorizes as if to showcase all at once what her husband’s money can buy. The Yenta is a nudnik: bossy, nosy, gossipy, neurotic, maniacally superstitious, and prudently religious out of fear of divine retaliation. She is a master of network building and matchmaking. She can be vaguely racist and does not treat gentile house-helpers well”(Clementi, 2013). Kominsky Crumb’s work unpacks “the Yenta”, while at times contributing to antisemitic tropes herself, especially with the drawings of facial features as “hawkish” and portraying Jewish women as “ugly” because of non-white features. Coming from a Spanish-Yiddish context myself, I can say that “Yenta” is not used, but the stereotypes are embodied to a certain degree by the word “Fajme” and the stereotype of “la abuela judía” (the Jewish grandmother) (Torres, 2014). The latter shares the rudeness towards house-helpers, especially if they are not Jewish, and the religious superstition (Torres, 2014). However “Fajme” and “la abuela judía” do not mean the same thing. “Fajme” addressed the material and the “poor taste” while “la abuela judía” addresses the resistance to adaptation, the religious superstition, and the “vague racism” Clementi (2013) describes.

¹¹ As a German language student, I have encountered this word, hence why I was able to make this connection.

Therefore, we can see that each country resignified different terms to fit their own context while keeping some threads connected to the original meaning. In Section 4, I will discuss how this affects intelligibility.

3. Methods

In this section, I will describe what kind of data I collected and how I conducted the perception test. Participants were asked to listen to a list of Spanish-Yiddish words as produced by an Argentinian Spanish-Yiddish speaker and answer three questions for each word. As mentioned in the introduction, this methodology is based on a previous pilot study (Friel, 2023). The literature has shown that one of the best ways to test intelligibility is to complete a phonological perception test (Van Heuven, 2009).

3.1 Participants

The criteria for selecting participants for the study were that they should have been exposed to Yiddish at home or have been part of a predominantly Ashkenazi Yiddish-speaking place such as a community center, synagogue, etc. Participants should have not been exposed to Spanish-Yiddish prior to the study nor should they have grown up in a Latin American country or Latin American Jewish community. To observe the present use of Yiddish, participants between 18-25 years old were chosen. I recruited all 8 participants from my personal network.

3.2 Data Collection

To collect a list of Spanish-Yiddish words that are actually used in real life and not just an abstraction from the Internet, I consulted with two Argentinean speakers who grew up actively involved in the Jewish community. Asking the consultants also allowed me to see which words were more frequently used and eliminate potential bias on what I think commonly used Spanish-Yiddish words are. I asked the two speakers to give me a list of 10 to 15 of the first Yiddish words that could come to mind. Both provided about ten words. Some overlapped, but others were quite different. I also asked the consultants to write these words down and give me their own definitions of each word. I specifically asked them not to search the definitions on the internet. Then, I proceeded to inquire about where they heard these terms. Both consultants said they used to say these terms in school and also heard them from their family members. The speakers attended a school in Buenos Aires renowned for their connections to the secular progressive Jewish community. I myself have participated in this school's extracurricular activities. I also added specific words that I know would be recognized by both Argentinian Yiddish speakers and that present phonetic differences in comparison to English-Yiddish. For example, I added the Spanish-Yiddish word “*knishe*” ([nife]), which has the English-Yiddish counterpart “*knish*” ([knif]). These specific words were drawn from my personal experience of hearing variations between dialects.

For the pilot study, a English-Yiddish mixed word (boy-ele¹²) was included in the list for a Spanish-Yiddish speaker to hear (Friel, 2023). Since the participant did not recognize the word, I decided not to include mixed words in my word list. Mixed words also draw on the morphological system and I wished to isolate as much as possible the linguistic features which could be impacting intelligibility. Based on my initial observations, the lack of recognition was possibly due to phonetic differences. So, my focus lies in this area.

¹² “Boy” with Yiddish diminutive.

Each word was assigned a semantic code as indicated in Table 1 further below. The codes correspond to the following categories:

- (I): Insults or dirty words
- (F): Food
- (A): Affectionate. It includes diminutives.
- (R): Religious
- (U): Uniquely Yiddish. A phrase or concept that solely exists in Yiddish.
- (O): Other

This semantic categorization is consistent with a previous study done by CONICET researcher Dr. Gabriela Scherlis (2022). The Argentinian researcher examined which Yiddish words were more likely to survive via code-switching. To do so, she divided them into semantic categories. Therefore, I followed her criteria, dividing the wordlist into similar categories such as “Food” and “Insults.” However, I included a new category, “Universal Yiddish.” This category includes words, expressions, or concepts in Yiddish that are untranslatable to other languages with a single word and that are frequently used.

The words have been placed on the list in a random order to not lead the participants to potentially guess by association the meaning of these words. Words were given without context to influence participants’ perceptions of the meaning of each word. All words have been written using Argentinian writing conventions, but an IPA transcription has also been included for clarification.

Table 1: Wordlist

Number	Word (Spanish-Spelling)	IPA	Meaning	Semantic Category
1	Potz	pots̃	The literal meaning is “penis,” but in use it means “stupid.”	I
2	Goy	goi	A non-Jewish person, usually a man.	U
3	Bobe	boʔe	Grandma	A
4	Zeide	seiðe	Grandpa	A
5	Shalom	ʃalom	Hello, religious and from Hebrew.	R
6	Acho	atʃo	“It is what it is.”	U
7	Kishin	kiʃin	kiss/kisses	A
8	Tujes	tuxes	The rear end of a human	I
9	Gelt	xelt	Money	O
10	Jaram	xaram	Pity for someone	O
11	Fajme	faxme	Rich or fancy person, but with poor taste	I
12	Shtikale	ʃtikale	A little bit of something	A
13	Shtink	ʃtink	A bad smell	I and O
14	Shnorer	ʃnorer	Someone who doesn’t share things and has bad intentions.	I
15	Yiddische Mame	idife mame	Jewish mother	U
16	Knishes	nifēs	Traditional Ashkenazi food: deep-fried snack filled with potato.	F
17	Mishiguene	miʃigene	An exaggerated person	I
18	Butz	βuts̃	An idiot, but with evil intentions	I
19	Blintses	βlint̃ses	Ashkenazi Traditional food: pancakes.	F
20	Matse	mats̃’a	Unleavened flatbread, essential to the Jewish religion	F and R

I asked a Spanish-Yiddish consultant to record this word list on WhatsApp, repeating each word twice. Listeners are more likely to recognize a word from a different language or dialect if they hear it multiple times (Van Heuven, 2009). Then, U.S. participants completed a recognition test. After hearing each word twice, they were asked the following questions:

1. Do you recognize this word? (Yes, No, Maybe, etc)

If they responded “Yes” or “Maybe” to Question 1, I followed up with:

2. If Yes, what does it mean?
3. Does anything feel different?

Question 1 tested whether speakers could self-identify as recognizing a word. It was meant to observe the speech recognition process (Gooskens & Van Heuven, 2021). Question 2 tested to see if there was any difference between meanings in both situations. After conducting the initial pilot study, the Spanish-Yiddish speaker offered different definitions for the words they heard than the ones I had written out for the English-Yiddish words she was hearing. For example, in the pilot study, I had written down the English-Yiddish definition of Yenta, which was gossip. However, the speaker said “Yenta” was just a name (Friel, 2023). Thus, this question will measure speech understanding or comprehension (Gooskens & Van Heuven, 2021).

Question 3 is meant to collect information on what the participants themselves could perceive as different. There were cases where I intentionally put words with differences I knew existed beforehand, but I also wanted to see what the speakers had to say. So, in accordance with Van Heuven (2009), this question is ultimately designed for the participants to give phonetic feedback.

All responses were recorded on a table. Answers to Question 1 were recorded as Y for “yes”, N for “no”, and D for “different word”. The latter refers to participants saying they did or maybe recognized a word, but when responding to Question 2 they answered something that had nothing to do with the word they actually heard. This phenomenon is further explained in Section 4. I added any responses to “different word” to a separate column called “comments Question 1” on a Google Sheets document. Answers to Questions 2 and 3 were transcribed verbatim from what participants said.

3.3 Predictions

Given the list of words, I expected that the most recognizable words will be “matze” and “shalom”, as these derive from Hebrew, have a religious connotation, and widespread use in synagogues and on holidays. I also expected participants to recognize the words “tujes,” “yiddishe mame” and “goy” with ease given how common these words are in Ashkenazi Jewish families’ conversations. Several words in the list are similar in pronunciation to English-Yiddish pronunciation so I also expected a high level of recognition. Words in this category include: “shnorer,” “tuches,” “zeide,” “shtink,” and “blintzes.” However, it is reasonable to assume that participants will have a harder time understanding the words “knishes,” “bobe,” “potz,” and “mishiguene” since there would be too many phonetic differences in how they are pronounced by the Spanish-Yiddish speaker, as explained in Section 2.3.2. Likewise, I expect that participants will not recognize “acho,” “kishin,” “gelt,” “jaram,” “fajme,” and “shtikale,” since I have never heard an English-Yiddish speaker say them nor have I found them on previous websites I consulted for my pilot study (Friel, 2023).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results of the Perception Test

Table 2 below shows how many times participants recognized each word. It's important to clarify that recognition means that the participant indicated that they know the word, it is not an indicator that the word means the same thing to them as it does for Spanish-Yiddish speakers or that they heard the correct word as some participants thought they heard a different word as will be discussed further below.

Responses were classified as “Y” (yes), “N” (no), “Maybe,” and “D” (different word). If a participant responded maybe but was able to define the word correctly, it was counted as a Y. If a participant responded “yes” or “maybe” to Question 1 but when responding to Question 2 answered something that had nothing to do with the actual word, the response was classified as “D.” Given that there are multiple instances of participants associating the word they heard with something completely different, I decided to create a separate response category, which is “D.” All “D” and “Maybe” responses were not considered in the final recognition percentage.

4.1.1 Question 1 and Individual Word Recognition

Table 2: Overall Responses to Question 1

	<i>Question 1: Do you recognize this word?</i>					
<i>LEXICAL ITEM</i>	D	Maybe	N	Y	Grand Total	Percentage
Acho			8		8	0
Blintses			3	5	8	62.5
Bobe			7	1	8	12.5
Butz	1		5	2	8	25
Fajme		1	7		8	0
Gelt	1	1	4	2	8	25
Goy				8	8	100
Jaram	2	1	5		8	0
Kishin			8		8	0
Knishes			5	3	8	37.5
Matse				8	8	100
Mishiguene			2	6	8	75
Potz	1		4	3	8	37.5
Shalom				8	8	100
Shnorer			6	2	8	25
Shtikale	1	1	4	2	8	25
Shtink	1	1	6		8	0
Tujes	1		3	4	8	50
Yiddishe Mame			6	2	8	25
Zeide			5	3	8	37.5
Grand Total	8	5	88	59	160	36.875

Table 2 shows us how often participants recognized each word and allows us to draw conclusions on how recognizable each word is.

I categorized different responses according to how many “Y” they got. If a word gets 8 to 6 “yes” responses, they are classified as **highly recognizable**. If the words got 3 to 5 “yes” responses, they are classified as **moderately recognizable**. All words with 1 or 2 “yes” are

categorized as **minimally recognizable**. If a word has 0 “yes”, it will be treated as a **non-recognizable** word. Maybes will not be considered for this part of the analysis. “Yes” responses will also be referred to as “full recognition” or “fully recognized.”

Participants did not recognize “acho,” “kishin,” “fajme,” “jaram,” and “shtink” at any point. Therefore, they are *non-recognizable* words. The *minimally recognizable* words are: “bobe,” “butz,” “gelt,” “shnorer,” “shtikale,” and “yiddishe mame.” It’s important to note that the only person who recognized “bobe” is a student of the Yiddish language. The words that were *moderately recognized* were “blintzes,” “knishes,” “potz,” “tujes,” and “zeide.” The *highly recognizable* words were “mishiguene,” “goy,” “matze,” and “shalom.”

It’s important to note that “shtikale” had a partial recognition that was classified as a maybe. A participant correctly identified the first part of the word but did not recognize the diminutive. Therefore, it was not included in the final percentages of recognition. A broader discussion of this case will be conducted in section 4.1.3.

Considering the predictions stated in Section 3, the data supports the prediction that “matze,” “shalom,” and “goy” would be highly recognizable. The data also supports the prediction “tujes,” “zeide,” and “blintzes” would be understood frequently. The prediction that “bobe” would be hard to recognize was also supported by the data. I accurately predicted that “acho,” “kishin,” “jaram,” “fajme,” and “shtikale” would be hard to identify. “Shtikale” was the only minimally recognizable in that group. All other words had null recognition.

There were, however, some unexpected results. Interestingly, “yiddishe mame” and “shnorer” were not as intelligible as I predicted they would be. “Shtink,” which I predicted would be frequently recognized, had null recognition. “Potz,” “mishiguene,” and “knishes”

surprised me, as I predicted speakers would have a harder time recognizing them due to the differences in vowels (see Section 2.3.2).

4.1.2 Question 1 and Semantic Categories

Table 3 is meant to show how recognizable each semantic category is and if said category might influence the recognition of a word.

Table 3: Response to Question 1 and Semantic Categories

Participant Responses		Question 1: Do you recognize this word?					
semantic category	Words in each category	D	Maybe	N	Y	Grand Total	Percentage Recognition (%)
Affectionate (A)	Bobe Kishin Shtikale Zeide	1	1	24	6	32	18.75
Food	Blintzes Knishes			8	8	16	50
Food and Religion	Matze				8	8	100
Insults	Butz Fajme Mishiguene Potz Shnorer Tujes	3	1	27	17	48	35.41666667
Insults and Other	Shtink	1	1	6		8	0
Other	Gelt Jaram	3	2	9	2	16	12.5
Religion	Shalom				8	8	100
Universally Yiddish	Acho Goy Yiddishe Mame			14	10	24	41.66666667
Grand Total		8	5	88	59	160	36.875

All semantic categories presented at least some recognition. The most recognizable categories were “Religion” and “Food and Religion.” Both “Food,” “Universal Yiddish” and “Insults” have similar recognition rates, with words being recognized about half of the time. It’s important to note that in the case of “Universal Yiddish,” the word “goy” was responsible for the

larger percentage of recognition since “acho” had no recognition and “yiddishe mame” also had very few “yes” responses.

Another important observation is that the “Affectionate” category, despite having the second-largest wordlist and very elemental words such as “grandma” and “grandpa” only had an approximate 18.75% recognition. It is possible to assume that kinship terms are universal and specific, making the possibility of any drastic change in intelligibility difficult. However, a case study in Suriname for the Ndyuka, Sarnami, Sranan Tongo, and Dutch, showed how kinship terms’ meanings and phonology are not stable in time and are susceptible to change in situations of language contact (Borges, 2013). Yiddish appears to manifest the same pattern as the Surinamese kinship terms in Borges (2013), leading to a loss in intelligibility among dialects.

“Other” only had a 12% recognition rate. It’s important to note that when the Argentinian Spanish-Yiddish participants suggested the word “gelt,” it was defined as just “money.” However, as we will discuss in the semantic differences section, in the U.S., this word has an additional religious connotation that I became aware of while conducting the perception tests. For this analysis, “gelt” was not counted as a “Religious” word to remain faithful to my consultants’ definition. Interestingly, “Insults and Other” had zero recognition.

4.1.3 Question 2 Responses

In this section, I will discuss the answers to Question 2. The only two words that will not be discussed in this section are “acho” and “kishin” because none of these words had a “Y,” “Maybe,” or “D” during the perception test. There are words with no recognition being analyzed in this section, but they did receive at least a “maybe” from participants. However, either not enough information was given on what the word meant when answering Question 2 or they said

a word that did not have anything to do with what was on the list of words. The reason for this is that I did not ask this question if participants responded “no.”

The majority of words in the stimuli list had the same meaning in both the Argentinian and U.S. contexts.. These words include: “blintses,” “bobe,” “goy,” “matze,” “mishiguene,” “potz,” “shalom,” “shnorer,” “yiddishe mame,” and “zeide.” Other words had mixed responses with participants offering different definitions of certain words. Some participants incorrectly identified certain words altogether. These words include “butz,” “jaram,” “knishes,” “shtikale,” “shtink,” and “tujes.” It must be noted that this is different than providing a different definition of the word. These words include: “butz,” “gelt” (explained in section 4.2.3.), “jaram,” “knishes,” “shtikale,” “shtink,” and “tujes.”

Most participants who recognized “butz” said it resembled “potz.” It is true, they both are similar phonetically. The initial consonants [β] and [p] have the same place of articulation as bilabial consonants . The second main difference relates to vowels specifically between the two main vowels [u] and [o] is in height. These two words also mean very similar things. Therefore, if participants answered that it meant the same thing as “potz,” then I counted them as recognized. However, one participant said the word meant “kibbutz, living.” The kibbutzim (plural of kibbutz) are collective agricultural settlements in Israel (Tikkanen, 2023). Even though “kibbutz” has “butz” in it, I counted the word as a “D” because the words do not share the same or have similar meanings, and “butz” is not a morpheme.

Then, there is the case of “jaram.” Most participants noted in Question 1 that they thought this was the Arabic word “haram.” One participant who said they may be recognized said it could mean “not kosher,” but they weren’t sure. This definition could be a product of the subconscious association with “haram.”

Most participants correctly guessed the meaning of “knishes.” However, it is interesting to note that one participant said they weren’t sure if the word was “knisches” or “naches,” which means little snack.

“Shtikale” offered a variety of different responses, the most out of any word in the word list. A participant said the word they heard was “shtiebele,” which means “little synagogue.” Another participant guessed that the first part of the word was “shtik,” which means “thing.” However, they did not recognize the diminutive “-ale.” Another participant said it was “shtik” with a diminutive that meant “very cute.” Finally, one participant offered the correct full definition of the word, which is “little piece.” However, this participant said: “[I] wouldn't expect to hear [“shtikale”] peppered in English.” It is important to note that this participant has studied Yiddish and is at a conversational level.¹³

In the case of “shtink,” a participant confused it with “shtick.” A participant who said they didn’t recognize the word also said the word sounded like the English word “stink.” “shtink” and “stink” mean the same thing. However, since the participant stated they didn’t recognize it as a Yiddish word, it was not counted as a “Y.”

Lastly, in the case of “tujes,” the majority of responses were in line with the Spanish-Yiddish meaning. However, one participant confused the word “tujes” with [duf]a], which means “soul” in Russian.

4.1.4 Question 3 Responses

Question 3 is meant to collect information on what the participants themselves could perceive as different phonetically/phonologically that were recognized at least once. The only

¹³ I did not collect demographic information nor did I collect information on the participants’ linguistic background. I asked them if they had contact with a Latin American Jewish community just to make sure I know this participant from my personal network and can attest to this information.

two words that will not be discussed in this section are “acho” and “kishin” because none of these words had a “Y,” “Maybe,” or “D.” As with Question 2 (see Section 4.1.3), the reason for this is that I did not ask this question if participants responded “no.”

Participants identified a series of sounds as being different. The vowels [i], [o], [u], and the consonants [x], [β], [r], and [s] stuck out the most to participants as being different from the sounds they would use while uttering Yiddish words. The following table shows the sounds the English-Yiddish speakers were expecting given their phonetic environment (Whitley, 2003) versus what was produced by the Spanish speakers along with an example word. The data presented on the table reflects patterns that were pointed out multiple times within the same word or among multiple words.

Table 4: Expected Sound vs Sound Heard

Expected sound in English-Yiddish environment	Sound produced by Spanish-Yiddish speaker	Example word (IPA Spanish-Yiddish)
[ɪ]	[i]	Bl <u>ɪ</u> ntses ([blɪnt̪sɛs])
[ə]	[i]	M <u>ɪ</u> shiguene ([mɪʃɪɡɛnɛ])
[ʊ]	[i]	M <u>ɪ</u> sh <u>ɪ</u> guene ([mɪʃɪɡɛnɛ])
[ʊ]	[o]	P <u>ɒ</u> tz ([pɒts])
[ʊ]	[u]	T <u>u</u> jes ([tuxɛs])
[g]	[x]	G <u>ɛ</u> lt ([xɛlt])
[b]	[β]	B <u>ɒ</u> be ([βoβɛ])
[ɹ]	[r]	Shn <u>ɒ</u> rer ([ʃnoɾɛr])
[z]	[s]	Z <u>ɛ</u> ide ([sɛiðɛ])
No stress	[ˈa]	Mat <u>z</u> e ([matsˈa])

Participants also noticed the lack of a [k] sound in the word “knishes” and the lack of a [j] sound in “yiddishe mame.” “mishiguene” presented the most differences in vowels within one word. However, according to Table 2, it is highly recognizable. In this case, participants said “all vowels” ([i] and [e]) were different but mainly highlighted the two vowel changes shown in the table.

The majority of speakers found “shalom” and “goy” identical or nearly the same.

4.1.5 Notes from post-participation

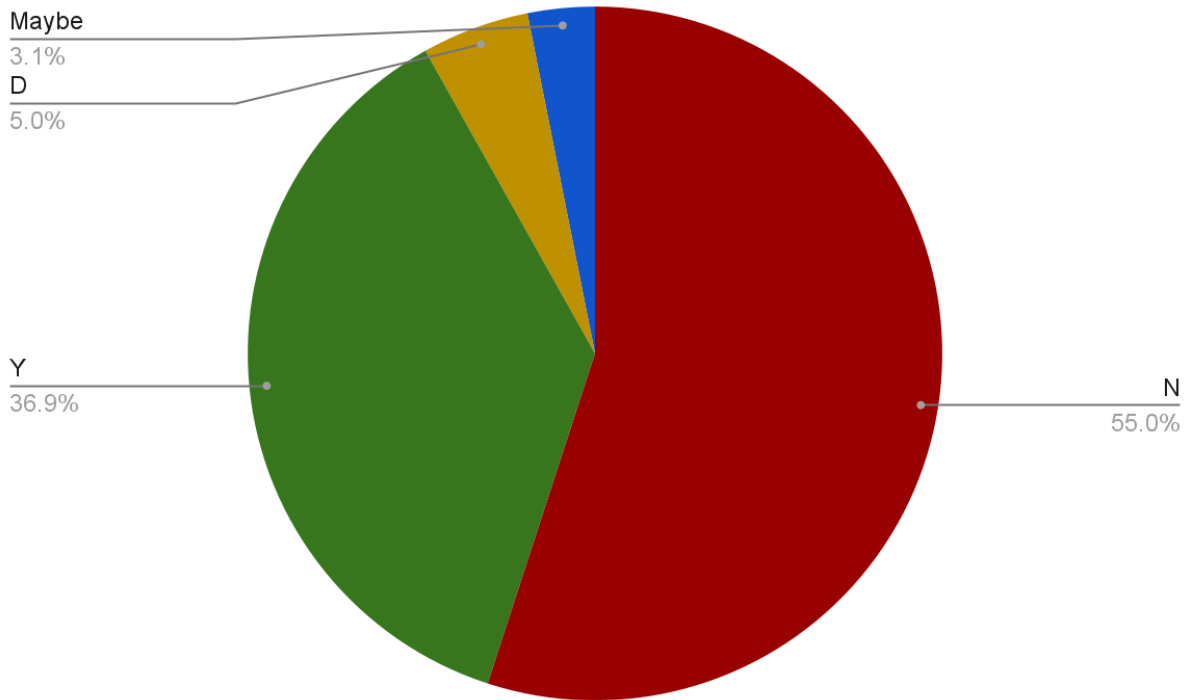
To my surprise, all participants requested to see the list after the test was completed. Interestingly, once participants saw the written form, they recognized many of the same words which they had not recognized when they heard them in isolation. I did not record which words they recognized as written intelligibility was not intended to be tested. Words that were with minimal recognition including “bobe,” “zeide,” and “knishes” were recognized once participants saw the written form.

After seeing the word “shtink” written down and with its definition, many participants said, “I didn’t know that was a Yiddish word.” Others said that, at the time of the test, they thought it was similar to the English word “stink,” which is exactly what it means. But since they didn’t see it as a Yiddish word, they said they didn’t recognize it.

4.2 Discussion

The following chart shows the overall intelligibility of Spanish-Yiddish words to English-Yiddish speakers. It represents the data from Table 2 above in the aggregate.

Chart 1: Overall intelligibility



Following the criteria of Gooskens & Van Heuven (2021), the term *intelligibility index* will be used to determine how intelligible a set of words is. This indicator is measured in percentages. As indicated by Chart 2, the overall intelligibility index is 36.9%. The literature has not strictly defined what constitutes a high, medium, or low *intelligibility index*¹⁴. However, Gooskens et al. (2018) set a threshold of 40%. This means that if two different languages' *intelligibility index* is at or above that percentage, speakers of those two different languages can communicate successfully. Spanish-Yiddish to English-Yiddish (S-Y to E-Y)'s *intelligibility index* is lower than this threshold. To better understand S-Y to E-Y's *intelligibility index*, it is comparable to that of a Czech speaker listening to Polish with minimal exposure (Gooskens et

¹⁴ Please note, there is a measurement called *Intelligibility in Context Scale* (ICS), but it does not apply to the study I conducted, as this is usually used to assess children's functional intelligibility with a range of communication partners that differ in levels of authority and familiarity in real-life situations (Neumann et al., 2017). Then, there is the *Speech Intelligibility Index*, which also does not apply to this context as it is used to assess hearing and other cognitive phenomena (Hornsby, 2004).

al., 2018). To visualize this relationship in the Romance language sphere, it is comparable to a Spanish speaker in Europe listening to Portuguese with minimal exposure¹⁵ (Gooskens et al., 2018). In terms of a Germanic language family tree, where Yiddish can be found, the intelligibility is comparable to that of a Swedish speaker with previous exposure listening to German (Gooskens et al., 2018).

However, S-Y and E-Y are -technically- varieties of the same language. In the section that follows, we will discuss what is affecting Yiddish intelligibility to the point where it falls below the Gooskens et al. (2018) threshold.

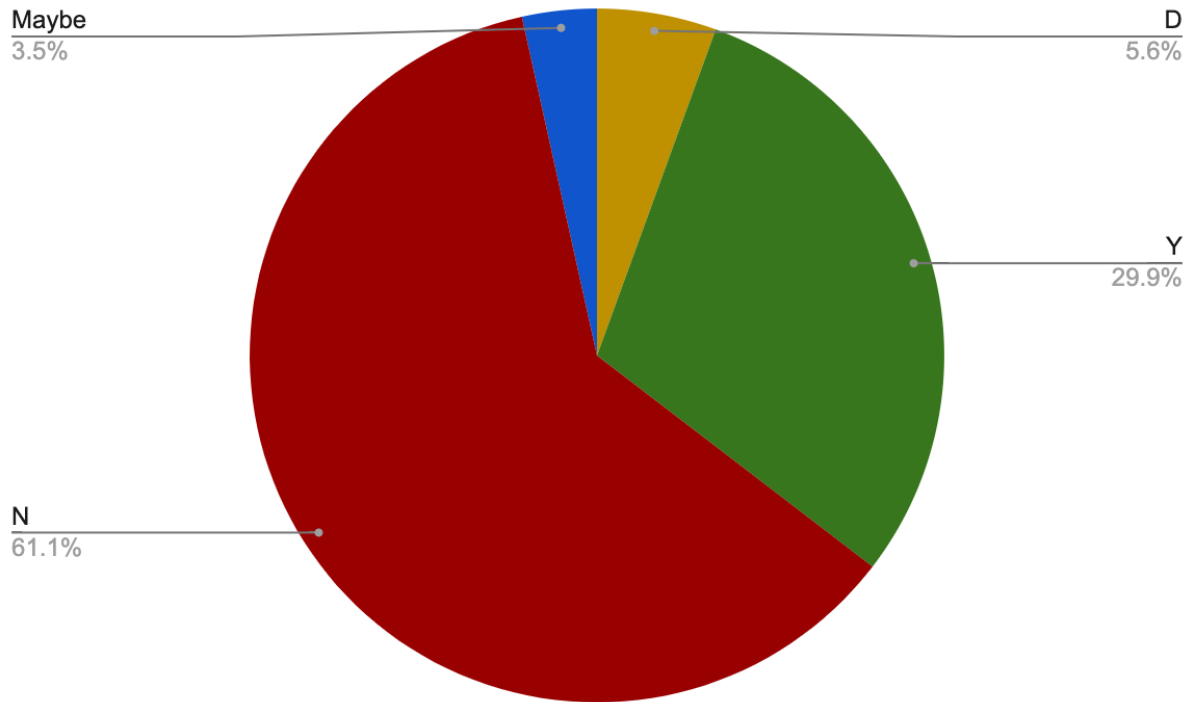
4.2.1 What Happens Without Religious Words of Hebrew Origin?

As shown in Section 4.1.2, Religion and Food and Religion had 100 % recognition rates for Question 1 that were verified in Question 2. It's important to note that each of these two categories is made up of one Hebrew loanword. “matze,” or “matzah” in English-Yiddish, is essential in Jewish liturgy because it is the food that helped the Jews survive while fleeing from Egypt according to the Old Testament. The food is particularly relevant during Passover Seder (dinner), as it is eaten to remember Jewish exile and suffering in the desert (N.P.R. Staff, 2015). “Shalom” is also widely used since it is a greeting that means “peace,” especially used during the Sabbath as “Shabbat Shalom” as a way to wish peaceful rest to another person (Cohen, 2021). These two phrases are universal to the Jewish people, no matter whether they are Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi, or from other groups. Another important factor at play is the increased levels of exposure to Hebrew in the Jewish community due to Zionism's promotion of this language.

¹⁵ The researchers explain that all participants and language varieties that were considered standard in the study were from Europe. The intelligibility relationships between Spanish and Portuguese in Latin America are different.

So, what happens when we take the Hebrew/religious words out of our data?

Chart 2: Data without Religion and Food and Religion, Overall Recognition



We can see in this chart that the *intelligibility index* of Spanish-Yiddish words diminishes by 7 percentage points from 36.9% to 29.9%. If we follow this interpretation, S-Y to E-Y's *intelligibility index* would now be compared to a Bulgarian speaker listening to Croatian with no prior knowledge (Gooskens et al., 2018) or a Spanish speaker listening to French (Gooskens et al., 2018). The extraction of Hebrew words shows us that the *intelligibility index* between S-Y and E-Y is even further away from the 40% threshold (Gooskens et al., 2018) as previously thought.

By removing the Hebrew-origin religious words, we can see how religious practices and the cultural significance of these religious expressions help maintain the intelligibility of those

specific words. However, this may not help Yiddish as a whole, since, as seen in Chart 2, overall intelligibility decreases.

4.2.2 Lexical gap

It could be possible to say that the non-recognition words were not recognized because they simply don't exist in English-Yiddish. Therefore, there could be a gap between the Spanish and English-Yiddish lexicons. To see whether there was a lexical gap, I consulted with two online and two hard-copy English-Yiddish dictionaries to see whether the words that had **null recognition** ("acho," "fajme," "jaram," "kishin," and "shtink") could be found there.

I consulted with The University of Kentucky Online English-Yiddish Dictionary (online), The Jewish English Lexicon (online), The Comprehensive Yiddish-English Dictionary¹⁶ (hard-copy), and The Yiddish Dictionary Sourcebook: A Transliterated Guide To The Yiddish Language (hard copy). In all four of these dictionaries, there was no entry for "fajme," "jaram," and "acho." It's important to note that the word "kishin" did not appear as such. However, The University of Kentucky online English-Yiddish did have an entry for a translation of "kiss" into Yiddish, the word "neshike." "Shtink" had definitions in all four dictionaries with some slight variations. Interestingly, The University of Kentucky's dictionary included a secondary jargon entry for "shtink" that reads, "to fail to pay (jeweler's argot)" (*Yiddish Dictionary Lookup*, n.d.). This example shows how there can be deviations in meaning in different social contexts.

Even though "fajme" was not in any dictionaries, I did find a word that could be related to it in The Comprehensive Yiddish-English Dictionary. "Fagtadagke" means "coquettish and frivolous young woman" (Beinfeld & Bochner, 2013).

¹⁶ It's important to note that this dictionary was adapted from French and may have influences from that language.

To verify that all words exist in Spanish Yiddish, I searched “acho” and “jaram” in the online dictionary Léxico Judío Latinoamericano. I did not have prior knowledge of these words before writing my thesis. “Acho” appears in the *Léxico Judío Latinoamericano* as “Se dice cuando algo no tiene importancia¹⁷” (*Léxico Judío-Latinoamericano*, n.d.). This definition differs from that provided by the Spanish-Yiddish-speaking consultant. In the same dictionary, “jaram” appears as “Prohibido; qué pena; qué horror/que no nos pase¹⁸” (*Léxico Judío-Latinoamericano*, n.d.). The Spanish Yiddish speaker’s definition matches the “que pena” entry. According to the dictionary, this word is primarily used in México. However, the speaker who provided this word grew up in Argentina. Interestingly, the words I knew beforehand, “kishin,” “shtink” and “fajme,” do not appear in this dictionary.

Based on the search in dictionaries, there seems to be a lexical gap between English-Yiddish and Spanish-Yiddish. However, “shtink” does not contribute to the gap but participants often confused it with an English word or other Yiddish words, which contributed to its null recognition. Interestingly, “kishin” can’t be found in dictionaries but alternative words for “kisses” exist in these dictionaries. This further demonstrates that there is a lexical gap between both dialects.

4.2.3 Semantic differences

Of the words that participants recognized, there was one which, despite being recognized, had a different meaning for these Yiddish-English speakers. This word, “gelt” means money in Spanish-Yiddish but as mentioned in section 4.1.3, participants of this study said this term referred to Hanukkah coins. While there is a shared semantic field in both definitions, the term

¹⁷ Translation: “It is said when something is not important.”

¹⁸ Translation: “Forbidden; What a pity; How horrible/ hope it doesn’t happen to us.”

“gelt” for English-Yiddish speakers has a religious connotation. The missing religious aspect in Spanish-Yiddish is likely because the two Argentinian consultants I worked with are part of a secular progressive community. However, it is important to note that scholars have recorded how Hannukah has a different value in the United States than it does in other countries (Abramitzky et al., 2010). After all, Hanukkah is not as important in the Jewish calendar as Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year), Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), and Pesach (Passover). While Eastern European countries and Argentina are predominantly Christian countries, the United States has become the “arbiter” of Christmas, with its own version of Santa Claus and its carols and sales traveling the world (Belk, 1993). Therefore, American Jewish parents began embracing Hannukah, which is usually celebrated not far from December 24th, as a way to give Jewish children an alternative to the American Christmas experience (Abramitzky et al., 2010).

“Gelt” is part of a larger phenomenon of words that adapt their meaning to their new social context (see Section 2.3.3). However, as in the case of “shiksa/shikseh,” “yenta,” and “chutzpah,” there seems to be a common semantic field between words. “Shiksa/shikseh” and “yenta” all refer to women. “Chutzpah” refers to guts and a wedding, which implies commitment to a big event and courage. “Gelt” refers to money or coins. Therefore, even though we see a drift in meaning, there is not sufficient evidence to prove that this may affect intelligibility as this phenomenon was only observed in one word out of 20. However, it is important to note that “gelt” was classified as *minimally recognizable* based on the results in Table 1.

4.2.4 Phonetic/Phonological intelligibility.

The decrease in intelligibility is also likely connected to phonetic/phonological influences from languages in contact with Yiddish. But how does this play out?

First, let's look at Yiddish phonetics/phonology. It's important to understand that before mass Ashkenazi immigration, Yiddish already had multiple dialects in Europe. In the United States and Argentina, most Ashkenazim came from Russia and Ukraine (*Pew Research Center*, 2012) or other Eastern European countries under the occupation of the Russian Empire (Del Rosario & Del Rosario, 2013). Within this area, the predominant dialects of Eastern European Yiddish are the Lithuanian, Polish, Belarusian and Ukrainian dialects. In the literature they can be defined as North Eastern or South Eastern (Katz, 1986). However, given the multiple variations within these dialect groups. In his research, Weinreich (1962) shows how different Yiddish dialects have predominant areas in different parts of Eastern Europe. Some dialects coexist within the same territory. For example, there are four different ways of saying "noses" in the Eastern dialect: [nezər], [nejzər], [nejz], and [nozn]. In the proximity to Krakow, both [nejzər] and [nejz] were used (Weinreich, 1962). Over a century has passed since Ashkenazi immigrants arrived on the American continent, so it becomes difficult to pinpoint which sub-varieties may be having more influence. However, it has been recorded that Lithuanian Yiddish was a trendsetter among other dialects back in Eastern Europe (Jacobs, 2005).

Let's begin with vowels. Yiddish had a system of long vowels that eventually was left out of use because Lithuanian Yiddish, which was considered "more correct," did not use them (Katz, 1986). Katz (1986) explains that vowels with words of German origin have a root-fixed stress, while words with a Semitic component have a "jumping stress." This means that stress can occur in different syllables. Yiddish vowels, as listed by Katz (1986), include: [a], [e], [i], [o], [u], and [ə]. Jacobs (2005) adds one more vowel specific to the North Eastern Yiddish dialect, [ø], usually used as the diphthong [øj]. Jacobs (2005) points out that this is an older retention that later merged to [ej]. Then, there is Kleine (1998) and her analysis of Yiddish

vowels. She lists Yiddish vowels from the traditional literature as [a], [ɪ], [ɛ], [ə], [ə], [v], [u], and [ɔ], differing from both Katz (1986) and Jacobs (2005). However, after an analysis of acoustic features, she narrowed down the vowels to five: [a], [ɛ], [ɪ], [ɔ] and [ʊ]. Later analysis by Kleine (2003) added [ɜ]. Interestingly, she doesn't include schwa, which is extensively mentioned in the literature (Katz, 1986; Jacobs, 2005; Weinreich, 1962) as a Yiddish vowel. It's important to note that since L1 Yiddish speakers have been few and far between, especially since World War II (see Section 2.1), the literature on Yiddish phonetics and phonology is not as detailed and up-to-date as it is with other languages. Given that Kleine (1998) provides acoustic evidence for the vowels she found in Yiddish and her writings on standard Yiddish (Kleine, 2003), for this analysis I will consider Yiddish vowels to be [a], [ɛ], [ɜ], [ɪ], [ɔ] and [ʊ].

According to Coloma (2018), the Rioplatense Spanish phonetic/phonological system consists of five vowels: [a], [e], [i], [o], and [u]. These vowels can be stressed and nasalized. It's important to note that the Rioplatense front vowels are slightly further back in the mouth even though they are classified as [a], [e], [i] (Coloma, 2018). When comparing Coloma's (2018) Rioplatense vowels to Kleine's (1998) vowels, we can see that they only coincide in the vowel [a]. Therefore, when we look at IPA transcriptions in Table 1 and Table 4, we can see that there has been a shift where Spanish-Yiddish now use solely Rioplatense vowels. U.S. English only coincides with Rioplatense Spanish in the vowels [i] and [u], excluding vowels only found in phonetic diphthongs which do include [e] and [o] (Flege et al., 1986). Interestingly, participants pointed out that words that had [i] or [u] in them should have a [ʊ], [ɪ] or [ə]. [ʊ] and [ɪ] exist both in English and Yiddish (Flege et al., 1986; Kleine, 1998; Kleine, 2003), which might suggest that Spanish-Yiddish was more affected by language contact than English Yiddish.

Given that native Yiddish speakers are few and far between nowadays and most Yiddish sources such as dictionaries are influenced by the place in the diaspora where they are produced, it becomes hard to ascertain whether English-Yiddish words are more similar phonetically/phonologically to the Eastern European forms or not. However, we can conclude that this pattern suggests that each dialect has turned to different vowels for their Yiddish words despite sharing some in their phonetic inventory. Consequently, this drift is likely to contribute to a loss in overall intelligibility between Yiddish dialects (Goosekens & Schneider, 2019).

Participants detected four cases of consonant differences between what they would expect from a word in English-Yiddish and what they heard from the recording of the hispanophone consultant. Therefore, I will now discuss the differences between consonants and how this may be affecting overall intelligibility.

Kleine (2003) maps out all Yiddish consonants. However, she does not include in her list of consonants the labiodental approximant [ʋ] mentioned in Dean-Olmstead & Skura (2017). Based on these two sources, we can say that the following consonants are considered standard Yiddish sounds:

Table 5: IPA Chart for Yiddish based on Kleine (2003) and Dean-Olmstead & Skura (2017)

	Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Post-alveolar	Palatalized	Velar	Uvular	Glottal
Plosive	p b		t d			tʃ dʃ	k ɡ		ʔ
Nasal	m		n			nʲ	ŋ		
Trill			r					ʀ	
Tap or Flap			ɾ						
Fricative		f v		s z	ʃ ʒ	sʲ zʲ	ɣ	χ	h
Lateral Fricative									
Approximant		ʋ				j			
Lateral Approximant			l			ʎ			

Yiddish also contains the following affricates: [t͡s], [t͡ʃ], [d͡z], and [d͡ʒ]. Coloma (2018), Rioplatense Spanish shares most of these consonants with the exception of [j], [z], [v], [ʔ], all uvular and all palatalized consonants listed in Table 5. I will now discuss the differences in consonants between Spanish, English, and Yiddish, and how these divergences affect Yiddish words as a result of language contact.

Rioplatense Spanish does not have [z] yet the word “zeide” is spelled with the “z” grapheme. This suggests that the sound [z] might have been in the original Yiddish word, but Argentinian speakers devoiced the [z] to [s] to follow their own phonetic and phonological rules. Since English does have [z] (Fry, 2004), it doesn’t need to undergo this process. Therefore, in this case, we can conclude that the consonant closest to the original Yiddish word pronunciation,

might be the English [z] that the U.S. American participants in this study detected. The difference in voicing between these two consonants can contribute to further the phonetic divergence between Yiddish in each context. Therefore, intelligibility is likely to decrease (Gooskens & Schneider, 2019).

In the case of “shnorer,” the only word with rhotics, the “r” graphemes are pronounced as [r]. In this case, English-speaking participants would expect to hear a [ɹ] as it would be produced in English (Whitley, 2003). This phoneme is not a part of the Yiddish phonetic inventory, while the alveolar tap, which is a part of English and Spanish inventories, is (Coloma, 2018),(Whitley, 2003). However, this doesn’t mean that the consonant that was used in the original Yiddish was the alveolar tap as there are two other rhotics ([ʀ] and [r]) in Yiddish’s phonemic inventory (see Table 5). The issue of Yiddish L1 speakers being scarce makes it difficult to prove that, in the case of “shnorer,” English used its [ɹ] while Spanish preserved the original [r]. Another possibility is that English and Spanish are drifting to different rhotics when they adapt Yiddish words. However, more words with rhotics would be needed to prove this point. The distance between the divergence in consonants may be affecting the capacity of participants to recognize the word -as seen in Section 4.1.1, “shnorer” is a *minimally* recognizable word. As Gooskens & Schneider (2019) point out, phonetic distance is one of the main factors contributing to the decrease in intelligibility.

Then there is the case of [β]. This consonant appears in multiple words in the word list (see Table 1). The bilabial fricative exists in Rioplatense Spanish but not in Yiddish or English (Coloma, 2018; Kleine, 2003; Whitley, 2003). Even though [b] is a phoneme that is in all three phonetic inventories, the Spanish speaking consultant solely used [β]. Therefore, we can see that speakers from different languages may approach these Yiddish varieties differently.

Lastly, there is the case of [x]. Both Spanish and Yiddish have [x] in their phonetic inventory. When English-speakers heard [x], they said they would expect to hear a [g]. The velar plosive is present in all three languages. The issue of the lack of L1 Yiddish speakers from Eastern Europe makes it difficult to affirm which variety of Yiddish was more or less affected by language contact in this case.

Based on the four examples of consonant differences between dialects, Spanish-Yiddish words seem to have been more affected by language contact than English-Yiddish ones. But, it is important to note that the countries of origin of the Yiddish sources I cited may affect which variety is deemed as being more susceptible to change. There are cases where it is hard to determine which variety was more affected by language contact, such as the example of [x] in Spanish-Yiddish and [g] in English-Yiddish in the word “gelt.” Nevertheless, as with vowels, despite sharing sounds in their phonetic inventories, Yiddish in each context is diverting to different phonemes, as seen with the example of the rhotics in “shnorer.”

4.2.5 Listening to words in isolation

As mentioned in section 4.1.5, participants were able to recognize more words once they saw them written down. This could be an indication that listening to words alone without any context may diminish their intelligibility. Another important factor that could be at play in this situation is that participants were not familiar with the voice and the variety of Spanish the speakers were coming from. According to Brodkey (1972), participants’ time to adjust to unfamiliar speech patterns and voice, also known as the *familiarity factor*, can affect intelligibility. The recognition of words written on paper as opposed to being listened to shows how intelligibility may vary according to the type of intelligibility tested. Therefore, future

research should include Yiddish words in context, written down, and with familiar voices speaking in a different dialect to see if listening to words in isolation is affecting intelligibility.

4.2.6 A Look At “D”

If during the perception test a participant responded “yes” or “maybe” to Question 1 but when responding to Question 2 answered something that had nothing to do with the actual word, the response was classified as “D.” Out of 160 tokens, 7 were categorized as “D.” The only word that had more than one token classified as “D” is “jaram.”

There were two kinds of associations speakers made. Some speakers confused Yiddish words with other terms of the same language. Others confused Yiddish words for terms in other languages. “jaram” is an example of the latter. In one case, a participant said it sounded like the Arabic word “haram.” In another case, a participant said “jaram” meant “not kosher.” Kosher is a Hebrew adjective that is used to describe food that complies with Jewish dietary laws (Regenstein et al., 2003). Therefore, “not kosher” would mean “not permitted,” which is closer to the meaning of the Arabic word “haram” In Section 4.2.2, the *Léxico Judío Latinoamericano* included an entry for “Jaram” that matched this definition. However, since the consultants did not provide this definition, I still considered it a “D.” The word “tujes” also experienced the phenomenon of being confused with a word from another language. A participant confused “tujes” ([tuxes]) with the Russian word for soul, “dusha” ([duʃa]). There was an instance where a participant who heard the word “potz” ([potz]) thought they had heard the word “what” with an Eastern European accent. Lastly, there was an instance of confusing the word “butz” with the Hebrew word for communal settlements in Israel, “kibbutz.”

There were three instances in which participants confused the word they were hearing with another Yiddish word. A participant confused the word “gelt” ([xelt]) with “haynt”

[xejnt]). According to the University of Kentucky online dictionary, this word means “today” (*Yiddish Dictionary Lookup*, n.d.). Then, a participant confused the word “shtikale” ([ʃtikale]) with the word “shtiebele” ([ʃtɪbəle]), a diminutive for a prayer room. Another participant confused “shtink” ([ʃtink]) with “shtik” ([ʃtik]), which means “a piece” (*Yiddish Dictionary Lookup*, n.d.).

There are not enough tokens to ascertain if there is a pattern as to which kinds of words are misunderstood. However it is worth noting that for future research in intelligibility studies, confusion of words should be further looked into.

5. Concluding Remarks

So, Can English-Yiddish speakers understand Yiddish words as produced by a Spanish-Yiddish speaker? The question cannot be answered with a hard “yes” or “no.” Based on the overall intelligibility of 36.9% of Spanish-Yiddish lexical items by an English-Yiddish speaker, the answer to the research question is “well...sometimes.” Yiddish has not lost intelligibility entirely. Three words (“matze,” “shalom” and “goy”) had 100% recognition rates and the majority of words were recognized by participants at least once. However, the intelligibility percentage falls below the standard of successful communication set by Gooskens et al. (2018). This decline in intelligibility reflects my own experience as a Spanish-Yiddish speaker in the United States, which is what motivated me to carry out this study in the first place. Therefore, we can conclude that the Yiddish language has lost intelligibility in at least one direction. Further studies should expand on my pilot study (Friel, 2023) and test whether English-Yiddish is as intelligible to Spanish-Yiddish speakers as Spanish-Yiddish is to English-Yiddish. Furthermore, this kind of research should not be limited to Yiddish alone.

Scholars should further look into the intelligibility of other Jewish languages exposed to language contact through immigration to the American continent, such as Ladino and Judeo-Arabic.

An important finding of this study is that which words were recognized and which weren't was not random. Besides, phonetics and phonology are not the only factors that play into how intelligible a word is. Culture, history, religion, and community consensus also play a role. This explains why religious Hebrew-origin words are the most recognized. Given the consensus around Hebrew as a religious language for Jewish communities, the language does not suffer from the geographical discontinuity in the way Yiddish does. Without religious Hebrew-origin words, intelligibility drops, as seen in Chart 2. However, there is hope that other words and phrases not tied to religion also have high intelligibility, such as “goy” or “mishiguene”. Another important observation is that the “Universally Yiddish” category may not look the same in both dialects of Yiddish, as this category had a 41.2% recognition rate. Words of affection (including kinship terms), food, and insults, which are some of the most preserved kinds of words in Yiddish (Scherlis, 2022) had various levels of intelligibility, but all of them were 50% or under. In fact, the “Affectionate” category’s recognition rate was under 20%.

Another important factor playing into the overall intelligibility is the lexical gap. Through searches in four different English-Yiddish dictionaries for the five words which were not recognized by participants, I found that three of them did not have any dictionary entries. The meaning of the word “kishin” (kisses), appeared in dictionaries but not with the same Yiddish word. This shows that there is a lexical gap between both dialects that is playing a role in the results which suggest a decrease of intelligibility (Gooskens & Schneider, 2019). In the case of “shtink,” that had null recognition, it can be argued that given its similarity to English, which

participants pointed out during the perception test, this word was not adopted into everyday speech for English-Yiddish speakers.

Even though we can find multiple examples of words that have altered their meaning to their social context in the literature, for this study, the phenomenon was recorded solely in the word “gelt.” Therefore, we cannot conclude whether semantic differences are contributing to a loss in recognition and intelligibility or not. Further studies should look specifically at words with different meanings in different dialects to see whether semantic differences affect intelligibility. However, based on observations on the literature and “gelt,” even though there is a shift in meaning, there is a common semantic field between words.

As seen in section 4.2.4, phonetic distance in both consonants and vowels is contributing to a loss in intelligibility between Yiddish varieties (Gooskens & Schneider, 2019). Even though the literature suggests that English-Yiddish is closer to Eastern European varieties, particularly when it comes to vowels (see Section 4.2.4), it is important to consider the language of the place in the diaspora where the literature is being produced. The sources cited in Section 4.2.4, including Kleine (2003)’s Standard Yiddish, were produced in English in America, the United Kingdom, and Germany. Therefore, analysis on Yiddish phonetics may be influenced by other non-Yiddish phonology. At the same time, there are very few L1 Yiddish speakers from Eastern Europe who are still alive, making it difficult to really see whether the literature is really influenced by English phonology. At times, the lack of L1 speakers also made it hard to discern which Spanish or English-Yiddish consonants drifted further away from Eastern European Yiddish. Nonetheless, Spanish and English varieties drift to different consonants and vowels for the same word even when some of these sounds are shared in both phonetic inventories. Given the lack of community consensus on phonetics and phonology between Spanish-Yiddish and

English-Yiddish speakers, the *areas of acceptable variation* (Karam, 2000) in each dialect don't match, accounting for loss of intelligibility.

It's important to take into account that all words were listened to in isolation, which as shown in section 4.2.5, may affect the capacity of words to be recognized. Therefore, future studies should include words in context (in sentences, written down, with a familiar voice in a different dialect) to see if listening to words in isolation is really affecting overall recognition and intelligibility.

Another key observation is that, in perception tests, participants can confuse words with others, both in the same language and in different ones. As discussed above, this phenomenon occurs even when told they would only be listening to Yiddish words. Future research should focus on what phenomena could be contributing to confusion in recognition of words.

In conclusion, Yiddish has not died. It has lived on through code-switching and through phonetic and semantic adaptation. However, geographical discontinuity, lack of community consensus, and language contact have caused Spanish and English-influenced Yiddish dialects to lose intelligibility. Even though there is evidence that intelligibility among English and Spanish dialects has severely decreased, Yiddish has learned to build a new home in both the U.S. and Argentina. As a Latin American Jew, I hope to encourage other scholars to widen their lens and study Jewish languages and life beyond the United States or Israel and study the social and linguistic connections that exist in the diaspora.

6. Bibliography

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