Timofey Arkhangelskiy, Natalia Tyshkevich

GRADUAL LANGUAGE DEATH: THE CASE OF BESSARABIAN YIDDISH

Timofey Arkhangelskiy,[1] *Natalia Tyshkevich*[2]

GRADUAL LANGUAGE DEATH: THE CASE OF BESSARABIAN YIDDISH[3]

In this paper we present our fieldwork data from the Bessarabian Yiddish, formerly the main language of the Jewish population of Moldova. Social upheavals of the 20th century caused huge migration of Jews from Eastern Europe, leading to separation of survivors from their community. This situation has dramatically influenced their linguistic knowledge of Yiddish, showing structural changes characteristic for language loss. These changes include significant increase in variability and structural simplification due to paradigmatic leveling and influence of the dominant language. The paper presents two case studies that investigate these effects on different levels of language organization: the diminutive formation model and the periphrastic verbal construction.

Keywords: language death, Yiddish, diminutives, periphrastic constructions.

JEL classification code: Z

[1]National Research University Higher School of Economics. School of Linguistics. E-mail: tarkhangelskiy@hse.ru

[2] National Research University Higher School of Economics. School of Linguistics. E-mail: natalie.tysh@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Most of the research dealing with language death or language obsolescence is focused on languages that go out of use as a whole, either gradually or abruptly. The example of Yiddish represents somewhat more complex pattern of language obsolescence. The Yiddish language as a whole is currently not endangered and has, according to different estimates, 0.5 to 1.5 million speakers worldwide. However, the language has seen dramatic changes in the last century. Once spoken by Jewish population of more than 10 million all across Eastern Europe, today it is actively used almost predominantly by Haredi (ultra-orthodox) communities residing primarily in the US, Canada and Israel. The Holocaust and emigration of European Jews to the Americas and Israel led to major structural changes in the language. Change of linguistic context, mixing and leveling of old dialectal varieties and shrinking of the Yiddish-speaking population to ultra-orthodox religious communities led to koineization and emergence of a new kind of Yiddish, called Haredi Yiddish [Katz 2004: 379-380]. While this new variety of Yiddish is doing well, it is the remnants of the old dialects which are in decline. Although there still remain some speakers in Eastern Europe, these traditional dialects, including the variety which is currently known as Standard Yiddish, are gradually dying because the speech communities were destroyed in a very short time span due to the Holocaust and the emigration.

Yiddish is a Germanic language historically spoken by Eastern European Jews. Traditionally it is divided into several dialect groups based on phonological and grammatical features. Jews who inhabited the historical territory of Bessarabia, which is mostly included in present-day Moldova, spoke a variety of South-Eastern dialect. Some of its characteristic features are vowel changes compared to Standard Yiddish ($a > o$, $o > u$, $u > i$) and retainment of the three-way gender distinction [Jacobs 2005: 60]. In the period between 1812 and 1918, these lands were a part of the Russian Empire. Since Jews in Bessarabia were granted more rights than in most other parts of the empire, this region attracted Jews from other areas, so that in 1897 Jews constituted 43.2% of urban and 7.2% of rural population in Bessarabia (these and the following figures are based on [Moskovich 2010]). In 1918-1940, this region was part of Romania; after that, it was a part of USSR until Moldova became an independent state in 1991.

After the World War II, there were 95,200 Jews in Bessarabia, around half of them could speak Yiddish. However, starting from the 1970s, most Bessarabian Jews have been actively emigrating to Israel. The number of Jews fell from approximately 98,000 in 1970 to less than 20,000 in 2000. The vast majority of present-day Jewish population of Moldova do not speak Yiddish. Most speakers who remained in Moldova are in their 60s or older, and "a rise in average speaker age is a strong predictor of a language's progress towards extinction", according to [Crystal

2000]. None of the speakers we talked to actively uses the language. The speech community does not exist anymore; those speakers who used to belong to it say they have not used the language for more than 30 years. Thus, it is hard to classify the language decline using classes offered in [Campbell, Muntzel 1989]. Although the situation is presumably best described as gradual language death, it also has features characteristic for 'sudden death' and 'radical death' scenarios. Many speakers of Bessarabian Yiddish perished during the Holocaust, while many others stopped speaking it because they emigrated to another country or were deprived of their speech community. Because of these factors, the process of language loss seems to proceed at a significantly higher rate for Bessarabian Yiddish than for most other languages whose decline is classified as gradual.

The investigation we present is mainly based on the field data that we collected in Moldova (including de-facto independent Transnistria) in July 2015. The fieldwork took place in Chişinău, Rîbniţa, Bălţi and Peresecina. We found and interviewed 19 persons, 14 female and 5 male, who either could speak the language or at least remembered it to some extent[4]. Most of them were over 75 years old, the youngest was 66. The dominant language for all of them was Russian. However, most also could speak Romanian, especially the oldest speakers because they attended Romanian schools prior to 1940, and one of the speakers was even a school teacher of Romanian in Soviet Moldova. Some of the younger speakers were also studying Hebrew, although none were proficient in it. Most of the speakers could not read or write in Yiddish, which uses Hebrew characters.

There are a number of characteristic processes that many gradually dying languages go through. One of the language loss models called dissipation model [Wolfram 2002] seems to describe fairly well the processes we observe in Bessarabian Yiddish. Structural simplification and increase of variability due to idiosyncratic change, which are listed as the most frequently reported phenomena in dying languages by [Cook 1989], are associated with dissipation. Analogy, which has been described as one of the main driving forces and mechanisms of grammatical change in general [Fischer 2008], and particularly paradigmatic leveling, is often the cognitive process which governs the simplification in dying languages (cf. [Taylor 1989]). All these features can be seen in Bessarabian Yiddish at different levels of language organization.

The paper will discuss two case studies which highlight increase in variability, simplification due to analogical leveling or overgeneralization of certain rules, and the influence of the domninant language on Bessarabian Yiddish. Section 2 will deal with the level of morphology, featuring a study of the diminutive suffixes, which constitute one of the most productive nominal derivation models in Yiddish. In Section 3, the level of syntax will be discussed. The focus of the discussion will be a certain verbal periphrastic construction used for Semitic loanwords. Conclusions will be

---

4   In each of the case studies presented below, 6 to 12 speakers out of this pool were interviewed.

drawn in Section 4.

2. Level of morphology: Diminutives

Diminutives probably constitute the most frequent and productive nominal derivation in Yiddish. Diminutives can be derived from most nouns with the help of several productive models. Semantically, Yiddish diminutives cover the meanings labeled in [Jurafsky 1996] as "small", "child/offspring" and, to a smaller extent, "small-type", "imitation" and "individuation/partitive". There are several groups of suffixes which can attach to a noun stem to produce a diminutive form. By far the most widespread and regular of them is a couple of suffixes, *-l* and *-ele*. Since all other suffixes (such as *-ke*, *-tshke*, *-nyu*, etc.) are either limited to a certain closed class of nouns or do not exist in some of the dialects, the focus of our research in Moldova was *-l/-ele*.

A noun can attach any of these suffixes provided certain restrictions are met. This simplest case is represented in (1):

(1)   tiš   tiš-l   tiš-ele

        table   table-DIM   table-DIM

        'table'   'little table'   'little table'

When both suffixes can attach to a stem, the semantic difference between them, if present at all, is very subtle. The description in [Mark 1978] first states that the longer suffix makes the diminutive meaning more intense and can also express affection of the speaker towards the object. However, in the following passages it seems to contradict itself, saying that the shorter diminutive can also express affection. In our experience, in most cases the difference in meaning is unclear and requires further investigation. Besides, there are several classes of words for which only one of the suffixes is available. These classes, according to [Mark 1978: 184-187], include the following (the examples are in Standard Yiddish):

a. If the stem ends in a vowel or a diphthong, only *-ele* is available (e. g. *bobe* 'grandmother' - *bobele* 'dear grandmother').

b. If the stem ends in a non-syllabic *-l*, only *-l* is available, while the stem is extended with the consonant *-χ* (e. g. *mil* 'mill' - *milχl* 'little mill').

c. If the stem ends in a syllabic *-l*, only *-ele* is available, while the final *-l* is stripped from

5

the stem (e. g. *mejdl* 'girl' - *mejdele* 'little girl').

d. If the stem ends with *-n* and is not included in a closed list of exceptions, the stem is extended with the consonant *-d* (e. g. *štekən* 'stick' - *štekəndl* 'little stick').

The nouns derived with *-l* or *-ele* have plural form in *-eχ* (e. g. *tišl* 'little table' - *tišleχ* 'little tables'), a model which is unique to diminutive nouns and does not coincide with all other productive models of nominal inflection. Other morphological peculiarities of the diminutive suffixes include the vowel change (Umlaut) process certain stems undergo, just as in some of the plural formation models (e. g. *gloz* 'glass' - *glezl* 'little glass'). This process is obligatory for a closed class of stems and optional for some other stems.

Since diminutive suffixes are indeed widespread and productive, they were generally well remembered by all our speakers. Even those speakers who could not remember most of the basic vocabulary, were able to recognize, and sometimes generate, diminutive forms. However, beyond the simplest and most regular cases the diminutive system shows signs of decay due to analogical leveling, overgeneralization and the influence of the dominant language. The problems start with the distribution of the suffixes *-l* and *-ele* for nouns which ideally should allow both forms. Consider standard diminutives in (2) and (3):

(2)   kots   kets-l   kets-ele

      cat   cat-DIM   cat-DIM

(3)   int   int-l   int-ele

      dog   dog-DIM   dog-DIM

For both words, both diminutives should be available in the language, the first requiring a vowel change in the stem (the second requires a vowel change in Standard Yiddish which is neutralized in the Bessarabian dialect). All diminutive forms should belong to the neutral gender, which is a general rule for diminutives of nouns which do not refer to humans. However, the speakers we interviewed provided a wide range of opinions regarding these forms.

Although all speakers allowed the forms in *-ele*, some of them prohibited forms in *-l*. Since these speakers allowed using *-l* for some other words, such judgment may appear arbitrary.

However, it probably could be explained by Russian influence. When the speakers were asked about the difference between the two forms, one of them told us that the form in *-l* was masculine, while the form in *-ele* was feminine. Another speaker, although she could not formulate the difference, probably thought similarly, as can be deduced from the following example she provided:

(4) groys-er   int-l   in   der   shtib

     big-M.SG.NOM dog-DIM   in   DEF.F.SG.DAT   house

'a big puppy in the house'

The inflected form of the adjective clearly indicates that the form *intl* is used as masculine. It is not clear if masculine gender here is inherited from the source noun, as the word *int* 'dog' is also masculine. However, the same speaker stated that the form *ketsele* was neutral and prohibited the form *ketsl*. Given that the noun *kots* 'cat' is feminine, it is quite probable that the masculine gender is a part of semantics of the *-l* suffix for that speaker. Such linguistic behavior could be explained by Russian influence, particularly by code copying [Johanson 2008]. According to productive models of nominal inflection in Russian, all nouns ending in a consonant in the nominative singular are masculine, while those ending in *-a* are feminine. Since an unstressed final *-a* is always replaced with *-e* when borrowing a Russian noun into Yiddish, it is likely that some speakers reconceptualized diminutives ending in *-l* and *-ele* according to the Russian model. Such an analysis could also explain why some speakers prohibited forms *ketsele* and *intele*: the Russian stimuli they were presented, *košečka* 'little cat' and *sobačka* 'little dog' were both feminine, which could make speakers search for an equivalent that would be also feminine according to their analysis. This can be further corroborated by the fact that the speaker who offered the example (4) initially denied the existence of the form *intl*. However, when presented with a Russian stimulus with another kind of diminutive meaning and belonging to the masculine gender (*ščenok* 'puppy'), she admitted that *intl* was well-formed and offered the example above.

Another interesting interpretation related to these examples is the distinction between the forms *kotsele* (without the vowel change) and *ketsele* (with the vowel change). While the former would be definitely incorrect in fluent Bessarabian Yiddish, one of the speakers (who remembered the language relatively well) admitted this form as acceptable, although less frequent than the latter, thus overgeneralizing the rule according to which vowel change in some of the stems could be optional. The speaker went even further, stating that the form *kotsele* meant 'little cat', while the

form *ketsele* meant 'kitten'. Such a development is in a way similar to the one described in the previous paragraph. In both cases, speakers were trying to go away from pure variability and invented distinct interpretations for two forms that used to mean roughly the same in fluent language. Of course, these examples differ in that in the latter case the speaker created that variability in the first place. Other speakers did not confirm this model and generally considered the form *kotsele* ill-formed, however, the speaker who told us of this pattern, was consistent, providing similar judgments for other animal names. It is noteworthy that the pattern developed in the idiom of that speaker assigns the meaning which is more frequent for this semantic class of words ("child/offspring") to the item which is judged more frequent or acceptable (the one with the vowel change).

Less regular models of diminutive formation were significantly more affected by language obsolescence. While the rules (a) and (c) were relatively intact, (b) and (d) were mostly forgotten or, in some cases, overgeneralized. Most speakers, when offered a noun ending in *-l*, were unable to produce a diminutive. While some of them admitted that the form in *-eχl* (e. g. *mileχl*[5] 'little mill') was possible or probably possible when the linguist presented such forms to them, some could not even recognize them. On the other hand, several speakers seem to have overgeneralized this rule so that in their language varieties it also applies to the nouns ending in *-le*. Consider the example (5), which, to the best of our knowledge, is incorrect in both Standard Yiddish and fluent Bessarabian Yiddish:

(5) kole   koleχ-l

    bride   bride-DIM

The opinions of the speakers regarding acceptability of the form *koleχl* and its meaning were divided. Some of them thought it was marginally acceptable, while others considered it a well-formed diminutive. One of the speakers told us that such a form would indicate cordial attitude of the speaker towards the person denoted by the diminutive, while another insisted that it was, quite on the contrary, a pejorative term. Such diverse interpretations suggest that the possibility of forming an *-l* diminutive for nouns ending in *-le* is a very recent innovation that occured independently in idioms of different speakers, and thus is likely to be the result of language obsolescence.

---

5   The form *mileχl* is a regular dialectal variant of the standard *milχl* cited above, as insertion of the vowel *e* in the cluster *lχ* is a characteristic feature of South-Eastern Yiddish.

The model (d) seems to be forgotten for most nouns. Instead, nouns ending in *-n* switched to the model (c) which was generalized by adding final *-n* to the list of stem endings subject to deletion. Consider the following example (6):

(6a) lefl   lef-ele   (6b) štekən   štek-ele

      spoon   spoon-DIM   stick   stick-DIM

The form in (6a), generally approved by our speakers, represents the model (c) and is correct in fluent Bessarabian Yiddish. On the other hand, (6b) would be incorrect in the fluent language, as the word *štekən* should conform to the rule (d), which produces the correct form *štekəndl*. However, most speakers, when presented with this and similar words ending in *-n*, either gave the form in *-ele* as the diminutive or at least recognized it as correct. For most such words, one of the speakers we asked was unsure about the form in *-dl*, and the rest of the speakers marked them as ungrammatical.

The fact that the speakers gave similar responses for the words of that class might indicate that the model switch could be an earlier development with no straightforward relation to language obsolescence. However, there are reasons why we believe this is not the case. It seems that the speakers started using model (c) only for the words of medium to low frequency, while several words which are presumably more frequent in speech still have diminutives in *-dl*. Specifically, for the words *zin* 'son' and *tsejn* 'tooth', all speakers generated or accepted as grammatical diminutives *zindele* and *tsejndl*. The default interpretation for the latter is 'a piece (of garlic)', which is a very frequent ingredient in Jewish and Russians cuisine of the area[6]. This indicates that the most frequent members of this class are stored in memory, while the rule itself was forgotten because of scarcity of the examples it is based upon. It is not clear why exactly the model (c) survived. One possible explanation is that more members of this group are frequent enough to be remembered than of the model (d), so that enough examples are available to corroborate the model even with diminished input. Another possible option is that this model is somehow cognitively simpler than (d). Although in our opinion the statement of the overall member frequency is true, a further investigation is required to reliably identify the reason for the switch.

Finally, the plural formation model restricted to diminutives in fluent speech was overgeneralized in most speakers to include every noun ending in a syllabic *-l*. In the example

---

6   Cultural importance of garlic is reflected in folklore. There is a short story told us by one of the speakers in Yiddish: "The grandfather comes home and asks his grandson: 'Why, is it not a Jewish home anymore?' - 'Of course it is, why are you saying it is not Jewish?' - 'Then why don't I hear the smell of fried onion and garlic?'"

below, (7a) represents a correct plural form of the word *lefl* 'spoon', which does not contain a diminutive suffix, and (7b) shows an incorrect version which was approved by most speakers.

(7a) lefl -   lefl   (7b) lef-l -   lef-leχ

      spoon.SG spoon.PL   spoon.SG-? spoon-PL

This is a clear example of simplification using paradigmatic leveling. Nouns ending in *-l* belong to a number of inflectional models, some of them non-productive, as is the case with *lefl*. The choice of inflectional model is generally not deducible from the stem and has to be memorized. Instead of using this complex system, the speakers adopted a simpler and more predictable one, using the (formerly) diminutive plural marker *-leχ*. Even those speakers who remembered the correct inflectional models for such words occasionally generated or approved the diminutive ones. For example, one of the speakers who could talk relatively fluently, when presented with the noun *epl* 'apple', initially gave the incorrect plural form '*epleχ*'. After some hesitation, he corrected it to *epl*, which is the right form, as in the case with *lefl*. However, some ten minutes later, he used in conversation yet another incorrect form belonging to a more productive model, *epls*. This third form shows that replacing the correct models with the diminutive one is in fact a combination of two processes. One of them is gradual obsolescence of non-productive inflectional models, and the other is gradual spread of more productive ones. While the *-leχ* model is ultimately winning in this process as the most simple, predictable and productive model, different productive models compete to replace the less productive ones.

3. Level of syntax: periphrastic verbal construction

Just as at the level of morphology, we see unusually high variability and instability at the syntactic level in Bessarabian Yiddish. The topic of our discussion here will be a certain kind of grammatical constructions. A construction here is understood in terms of [Croft 2001:18], who defines them as entities consisting of pairings of form and meaning that are at least partially arbitrary. The construction in question is the V + PTCP, where V stands for verb (several 'light verbs' are available for this construction) and PTCP for participle of Hebraic origin. Yiddish vocabulary has substantial Hebrew-Aramaic component, and this construction is a primary grammatical tool for borrowing Hebrew-Aramaic verbs into Yiddish. Traditionally periphrastic grammatical domain is described through two morphosyntactic parameters, non-standard word order and a special past form for auxiliary (see the review in [Jacobs et al. 1994]). Another

important feature of this construction in Standard Yiddish is the correlation between the choice of the verb, the presence of the reflexive particle *ziχ* and the semantics of the derivational class (binyan) of the borrowed item in the source language [Luchina, Tyshkevich 2015]. The process of diachronic development of this construction can be described as code-copying in terms of [Johanson 2008] (see more in [Fedchenko 2013]).

The periphrastic borrowing model becomes highly productive in the speech of Modern Yiddish speakers who know Hebrew, and eventually spreads to new, previously unavailable contexts (Elena Luchina, p. c.). Quite on the contrary, in Bessarabian Yiddish it ceases to operate as a single construction and undergoes intense reanalysis, in terms of [Harris, Campbell 1995]. According to our observations, this once reasonably productive construction is no longer analyzed as such by the speakers. It started losing its grammatical properties and presumably was split into isolated formulaic expressions, usually revealing huge language loss tendency (see [Hyltenstam et al. 1989] for bilingualism and [Wray 2005] for aphatic studies approach).

The construction involving the verb *zajn* 'be' and a Semitic participle is now predominantly used in a small number of common formulaic expressions. For example, *jojtsi zajn* 'fulfill an obligation' is considered acceptable by most of our interviewees only in one particular formulaic sentence. Whereas corpus data for all dialects demostrates considerable frequency of periphrastic construction, we did not observe it in spontaneous speech of modern Bessarabic Jews.

Only one such expression, *zajn mojχl* 'forgive', was recognized by all speakers we interviewed. All other items from the list of most frequent instances of *zajn* + PTCP in our questionnaire were recognized by only a part of the speakers. During elicitation, the only method we could use for these constructions, most speakers who had little confidence in semantics of the instances except *mojχl zajn*, showed a curious priming effect. We noticed that after the activation of *mojχl zajn* in memory, speakers tended to (incorrectly) ascribe the same meaning 'forgive' to other instances of *zajn* + PTCP model they were not sure about. An experiment we conducted after that showed that the priming effect indeed takes place. Several speakers were asked questions about a number of *zajn* + PTCP instances, with *mojχl zajn* appearing last in the list. Initially, the speakers could not provide a translation for most of the instances preceding *mojχl zajn* in the questionnaire, and did not translate any of them as 'forgive'. However, when after that they were asked again about several of the instances they had had difficulty translating, all of them told that at least one of the instances in fact meant 'forgive'. The exact instances that speakers translated as 'forgive' were different for different speakers, which indicates that this is indeed a process which occurs independently in different speakers rather than in the dialect as a whole. Here we see that although the speakers may still recognize the formal part of the construction, they do not remember its

meaning. Nevertheless, they show behavior which in our opinion is consistent with the exemplar model advocated by [Bybee 2013]. Remembering that there used to be a construction, the speakers make an attempt to reconstruct its meaning based on particular instances of the construction that they remember reliably. Since they do not have access to a sufficient number of examples for the meaning to be successfully recovered, they do not succeed, reconstructing the incorrect meaning 'forgive' instead.

Another instance of this construction, *poter vern* 'get rid of', could be reproduced only in the past tense by speakers who remembered it. Thus, they accepted the sentence in (8a), but insisted that (8b) was ungrammatical:

(8a) mir zaj-nen   poter   ge-vor-n   finem   int.

      we be-PRS.1PL (rid)   PTCP.PST-become-PTCP.PST of+DEF.M.SG.DAT dog

'We got rid of the dog'.

(8b)* mir vel-n   poter   ver-n   finem   int.

      we   AUX.FUT-1PL (rid)   become-INF of+DEF.M.SG.DAT   dog

'We will get rid of the dog'.

In fluent language, the construction is not restricted to any particular tense. In this case, *poter gevorn* was probably remembered as a formulaic expression by the speakers. The construction naturally occurs much more frequently in the past tense in the fluent language than in any other form. This probably led to the situation in which speakers learned the phrase *poter gevorn* as a formulaic expression rather than an instance of a more general construction, in the absence of sufficient number of present-tense or future-tense examples.

Even in the instances where the borrowed participle can be used as a separate word there is great variability, although such instances generally seem to be remembered better. For example, in *mešige zayn* 'be crazy' some speakers allowed the borrowed part to be changed to the adjective *mešigene*, which in Standard Yiddish can only be used in the attributive position (9):

(9) Di   bist   mešigene   geven.

you.SG	AUX.2SG	crazy	be.PTCP.PST

'You became crazy.'

The periphrastic verbal construction was, in all probability, widespread in Bessarabian Yiddish in the beginning of the 20th century, as our corpus analysis of text written by Sholem Aleichem (who wrote in a relatively similar South-Eastern variety) suggests. With loss in frequency and productivity, the remnants of this construction in Bessarabian Yiddish also lose the properties traditionally associated with it. For example, the usage of a special past tense auxiliary is no longer required. In the correct example (10a), the past tense of the construction is expressed with the help of a have-auxiliary and a participle of the construction verb. However, it was prohibited by three out of nine speakers, and only two stated it was the only possible option. The incorrect example (10b), which employs a past tense formation model with be-auxiliary, which is normal for the verb *zajn* outside of the periphrastic construction, was accepted as grammatical by five speakers.

(10a)	Der	Got	ot	dir	mojχl	geven.
	DEF.M.SG.NOM	god	have.3SG	you.SG.DAT	(forgiving)	be.PTCP
(10b)	Der	Got	iz	dir	mojχl	geven.
	DEF.M.SG.NOM	god	be.3SG	you.SG.DAT	(forgiving)	be.PTCP

'The God has forgiven you'.

Another characteristic property associated with the periphrastic construction is non-standard word order. In literary Yiddish, constructions involving a 'light' or auxiliary verb and the participle of the main verb, particularly the passive construction and the periphrastic construction in question, normally require that the participle be placed before the verb. In some varieties of contemporary colloquial Yiddish, this rule does not always work for the passive construction (Elena Luchina, p. c.), however it still holds for the periphrastic construction. Two examples (11a-b) from [Jacobs et al. 1994] show that moving the participle to the right is generally not acceptable:

(11a)	er	vet	maskim	zaj-n

	he	AUX.FUT.3SG	(agreeing)	be-INF

(11b)^{??}	er	vet	zaj-n	maskim
	he	AUX.FUT.3SG	be-INF	(agreeing)

'He will agree.'

Bessarabian Yiddish speakers, nevertheless, generally accepted both word orders:

(12) iχ   ken   dir   mojχl   zaj-n /   zaj-n   mojχl

   I   can.PRS   you.SG.DAT (forgiving) be-INF   be-INF   (forgiving)

'I can forgive you.'

Yet another irregularity with these constructions includes the past tense formation model which is productive for normal verbs, but is unusual for the periphrastic construction. While the speakers always use the correct construction for the present tense (13a), in the past tense we observed a synthetic model (13b) which has never been registered for other Yiddish varieties:

(13a) iχ   bin   mojχl

   I   be.PRS.1SG   (forgiving)

'I forgive'.

(13b) iχ   ob   ge-mojχl-t

   I   AUX.PRS.1SG   PTCP.PST-(forgiving)-PTCP.PST

'I forgave'.

It may seem that the productive synthetic model is replacing the analytic one. However, this is not the case: only one speaker used the pattern of (13b), while all other speakers we interviewed prohibited this example. As it was with the level of morphology, we see that every speaker

introduces their own idiosyncratic changes to the grammatical system of the language. The deviations from the standard grammar in different speakers are numerous and unpredictable. Therefore it seems impossible to use a prototype approach for its description, as was made by e. g. [Taylor 1998] for the description of possessive constructions, as it is hard to find relevant properties that would define the core of the construction. It is also hardly possible to compare this situation to transient stages in grammatical development, also characterized by variability and instability (cf. [Lander 2015a] about Western Circassian nominal complex). This approach presumes that some fragments of grammar are observing while moving from one grammatical prototype towards another within the process of grammaticalization (see more in [Lander 2015b]). The case of Bessarabian Yiddish is different in that it is hardly possible to locate the prototypical state the grammar is moving towards. Because of the factors which accounted for the language loss and seemingly random changes in individual grammars, it is impossible to hypothesize if the periphrastic construction would turn into something else (e. g. become lexicalized) during further development.

We also cannot reliably trace the moment when the construction in question dissipated. We cannot tell whether it was not properly acquired in the childhood or forgotten later due to disuse. It would probably last longer if the appropriate religious contexts in which it was widely used, were available (e. g. *mepilpul zajn ziχ* 'interpret texts in the Talmudic tradition'). However, the cultural context is gone, and most speakers have never seen the instances of the periphrastic construction, associated with it.

4. Conclusion

Bessarabian Yiddish exhibits signs often associated with gradually dying languages. Significantly increased variability and instability permeate its grammatical system at different levels. Although analogy (and particularly paradigmatic leveling) and the influence of the dominant language are the factors that mainly govern the language change, the outcome of this process is relatively unpredictable and differs in individual grammars of different speakers. Given its current state, it is often impossible either to tell what the grammar was like when multiple idiosyncratic changes started appearing, or to determine the target state of these changes. In other words, it is hardly possible to describe the current situation as reorganization of language system, we can only postulate the radical unnaturalness of all observed deviations, which makes it impossible to locate the target state the grammar is moving towards..

References

Bybee, J., 2013, Usage-based theory and exemplar representations of constructions, in *The Oxford handbook of construction grammar*, pp. 49-69.

Campbell, L., & Muntzel, M. C., 1989, The structural consequences of language death, in *Investigating obsolescence: Studies in language contraction and death*, pp. 181-196.

Croft, W., 2001, *Radical construction grammar: Syntactic theory in typological perspective*, Oxford University Press.

Crystal, David, 2000, *Language death*. Ernst Klett Sprachen.

Fedchenko V., 2013, Аналитические глагольные формы с еврейско-арамейским компонентом в идише. Доклад на конференции, посвященной 150-летию Кафедры общего языкознания СПбГУ [Periphrastic verbal forms with Hebrew-Aramaic component in Yiddish. Talk at the Conference dedicated to 150 years of the Chair of General Linguistics at Saint-Petersburg State University] (the abstract is available at http://genling150.phil.spbu.ru/tezisy-konferencii)

Fischer, O., 2008, On analogy as the motivation for grammaticalization, in *Studies in Language*, *32*(2), pp. 336-382.

Hyltenstam, K., Obler, L. K., 1989, Bilingualism across the lifespan: Aspects of acquisition, maturity and loss, Cambridge University Press.

Jacobs, N. G., 2005, *Yiddish: A linguistic introduction*, Cambridge University Press.

Jacobs, N. G., Prince, E. F. & van der Auwera, J., 1994, Yiddish, in *The Germanic Languages, ed. by Ekkehard König & Johan van der Auwera*, London: Routledge, pp. 388-419.

Johanson, L., 2013, Isomorphic processes Grammaticalization and copying of grammatical elements, in *Shared Grammaticalization: With special focus on the Transeurasian languages. Edited by Martine Robbeets and Hubert Cuyckens*. Studies in Language Companion Series, 132, pp. 101-110.

Jurafsky, D., 1996, Universal tendencies in the semantics of the diminutive. *Language*, pp. 533-578.

Katz D., 2004, Words on Fire: The Unfinished Story of Yiddish. NY, USA: Basic Books

Lander, Yu, 2015, Nominal complex in West Circassian: between morphology and syntax, unpublished MS thesis.

Lander, Yu, 2015, On how compositionality relates to syntactic prototypes and grammaticalization, in: *Donum semanticum: Opera linguistica et logica in honorem Barbarae*

Partee a discipulis amicisque Rossicis oblate, ed. by P. Arkadiev et al. Moscow: LRC Publishers, pp. 148–157.

Luchina, E., Tyshkevich, N., 2015, Глагольные аналитические конструкции семитского происхождения среди других перифрастических глаголов в идише [Verbal periphrastic construction of Semitic origin among other periphrastic constructions in Yiddish], in Judaica Petropolitana, № 4

Mark, Y., 1978, Gramatik fun der yidisher shprakh [A grammar of standard Yiddish], New York: Congress for Jewish Culture.

Moskovich, W., 2010, Bessarabia, in YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. Retrieved December 7, 2015, from http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Bessarabia

Taylor, A. R., 1989, Problems in obsolescence research: the Gros Ventres of Montana, in *Investigating Obsolescence: Studies in Language Contraction and Death, edited by Nancy C. Dorian*, pp. 167-180.

Taylor, J. R, 1998, Syntactic constructions as prototype categories, in: The New Psychology of Language: Cognitive and Functional Approaches to Language Structure, ed. by M. Tomasello. Mahwah: Laurence Erlbaum Associates, pp. 177–202.

Wray, Alison, 2005, *Formulaic language and the lexicon*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 217-247.

Timofey Arkhangelskiy,
National Research University Higher School of Economics. School of Linguistics. E-mail: tarkhangelskiy@hse.ru

Natalia Tyshkevich

National Research University Higher School of Economics. School of Linguistics. E-mail: natalie.tysh@gmail.com