

THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM  
CENTER FOR SLAVIC LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES



## **JEW'S AND SLAVS**

SERIES EDITED BY  
PROF. WOLF MOSKOVICH

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THE CENTER FOR STUDIES OF HISTORY  
AND CULTURE OF EAST EUROPEAN JEWS

## **JEWS AND SLAVS**

**Volume 22**

Edited by  
Wolf Moskovich (Jerusalem)

### **YIDDISH – A JEWISH NATIONAL LANGUAGE AT 100**

PROCEEDINGS OF CZERNOWITZ YIDDISH LANGUAGE 2008  
INTERNATIONAL CENTENARY CONFERENCE

Jerusalem–Kyiv  
2010

### **Jews and Slavs, 22**

Edited by  
W. Moskovich

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### **The vitality of Yiddish among Hasidic infants and toddlers in a low SES preschool in Brooklyn**

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**Abstract** *The first study of the acquisition of Yiddish by young children reported here was triggered by a) the growing awareness by the Early Childhood Center Yeled V'Yalda, Brooklyn, New York, of a need for a language assessment tool for the fast growing number of Yiddish-learning pre-schoolers to better serve them and b) the identification of demographic and linguistic factors that characterize the Hasidic Yiddish-speaking community that enabled us to investigate issues at the core of current theoretical debates in the fields of language acquisition and bilingualism and to address clinical and educational concerns. This project was made possible by the development of innovative research strategies adapted to this cultural and linguistic group. The findings that emerge from the data collection on 82 children between 14 and 38 months reveal that when Yiddish is the home-language it tends to be the dominant language in that it is used at least 75% of the time. The comparative analyses of the pattern of lexical and morphosyntactic development across different groups exposed to different percentages of Yiddish and English reveal: a) an effect of percentage of exposure on lexical development; b) differences between the use of decontextualized language in each language in the same bilinguals and c) a lack of effect of percentage of exposure on children exposed up to 50% Yiddish on the order of acquisition of different constructions and on the age at which they are acquired. Additionally the data on balanced bilinguals confirm previous findings on the effects of rich morphological paradigms on the order of acquisition of constructions in the two languages and sheds an interesting light on the relation between vocabulary and morphosyntactic development. The theoretical, clinical and educational implications of these findings are discussed. This study provides strong systematic empirical evidence for the vitality of Yiddish among Hasidic infants and toddlers enrolled in the pre-school center Yeled V'Yalda and demonstrates that the various demographic and linguistic contexts in which these children are raised enable us to address issues that are relevant to bilinguals acquiring different language combinations.*

#### **1. Introduction**

Nine criteria have been identified to measure the vitality (and hence the level of endangerment) of a language (Fishman, 1991, UNESCO, 2003). These include:

1. Intergenerational language transmission;
2. Availability of materials for language education and literacy;
3. Community members' attitudes towards their own language;
4. Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies, official status and use;
5. Shifts in domains of language use;
6. Response to new domain and media;
7. Type and quality of documentation;
8. Absolute number of speakers;
9. Proportion of speakers within the total population.

The aims of this chapter are two fold. First it is to empirically evaluate the scope of the intergenerational transmission of Yiddish in the Hasidic population in Brooklyn (criterion 1 above) (see Isaacs, 1999, 2004 and Katz, 2006 on the need for such a contribution) and to address several other criteria listed above with respect to the vitality of Yiddish. Secondly, it also demonstrates that the exceptionally varied demographic and linguistic environments in which Hasidic Yiddish-speaking children are raised provide an ideal research context in which to address psycholinguistic issues that are central to current theories and that have profound and broad educational and clinical implications.

#### **2. Context of this study**

According to the US 2000 census, 178,945 speakers of Yiddish reside in the United States. They constitute 0.06 % of the US population and 0.38% of US residents who speak a language other than English. The majority (63%) are concentrated in the New York State area. In Brooklyn, according to the New York City Department of City Planning (2004) report, two areas have recently undergone tremendous increases in the number of Yiddish speakers: (i) 22, 407 Yiddish speakers over 5 years of age resided in Brooklyn Community District 1 (that includes

Williamsburg) in 2000, that is the result of a 34.1% increase in number of speakers between 1990 and 2000. In 1990 they constituted 17.1% of the population of their district and in 2000 21.1%. In this district more than half (55.3%) the speakers of all minority languages reported their lack of proficiency in English. In 2000 28.5% of the district residents spoke English only and the next largest linguistic group is made up of speakers of Spanish and Spanish Creoles, followed by speakers of Yiddish (21.3%), Polish (16.7%) and Chinese (2.9%).

(ii) 32,889 Yiddish speakers over 5 years of age resided in Brooklyn Community District 12 (that includes Borough Park) in 2000, that is the result of a 30% increase in number of speakers between 1990 and 2000. In 1990 they constituted 28.2% of the population of their district and in 2000 27.9%. Half of the users (49.2%) of all minority languages reported they do not speak English very well. In 2000, 38.8% of the residents spoke English only and the largest linguistic minority is the Yiddish-speaking community (27.9%) followed by speakers of Spanish/Spanish Creole (17.7%), Chinese (12.4%) and Russian (11.5%).

These figures demonstrate that a) the number of Yiddish speakers is increasing in these two districts and b) the Yiddish-speaking community constitutes a substantial proportion of the residents of these two districts- two factors that facilitate the vitality of a language according to the Fishman (1991) and UNESCO (2003) criteria listed above. The examinations of the linguistic breakdowns pertaining to other districts demonstrates that this change is not the result of leaving other Brooklyn or New York districts or US states (US census 2000). Nor is it the outcome of immigration trends outlined in Fix & Passel (2003). Instead the high birth rate of the Yiddish-speaking community best accounts for these demographic changes that triggered the need for a range of health and educational services addressing the needs of Yiddish-speaking children.

Yeled V'Yalda Early Childhood Center (henceforth YVY) was originally founded 28 years ago to serve the Hasidic communities of Brooklyn. It first served 80 children in Williamsburg. Since then it has grown and now provides services to more than 2,000 (0 to year 5 year old) children in education programs, 3,500 (between 6 months and 21 years of age) in clinical services (including speech and language pathology, physical and educational therapy) and 4,000 in the nutrition programs. YVY locations are spread across Staten Island and Brooklyn. In Brooklyn, four sites are located in Williamsburg and ten in Borough Park (see figure 1 below). YVY serves low income populations and is funded by a range of federal sources, New York State and New York City and private funds. YVY's distinctive features include: a) the exceptionally high number of children- it is one of the two largest Head Start in New York City, b) the very high proportion (almost 70%) of children whose home language is not English compared to the proportion of 30% at a national level that will be reached by 2015 (Fix & passel, 2005); c) the exceptionally broad range of ethnic, cultural and linguistic communities- more than 15 languages are used by YVY children in addition to English and Yiddish and they include Arabic, Farsi, Haitian Creole, Hebrew, Spanish and Russian and d) the comprehensiveness of the education and health services it provides. Indeed its mission is to provide low SES boys (*yeled*) and girls (*yalda*) with a professional preschool education focusing on the whole child and the family (see figure 2).

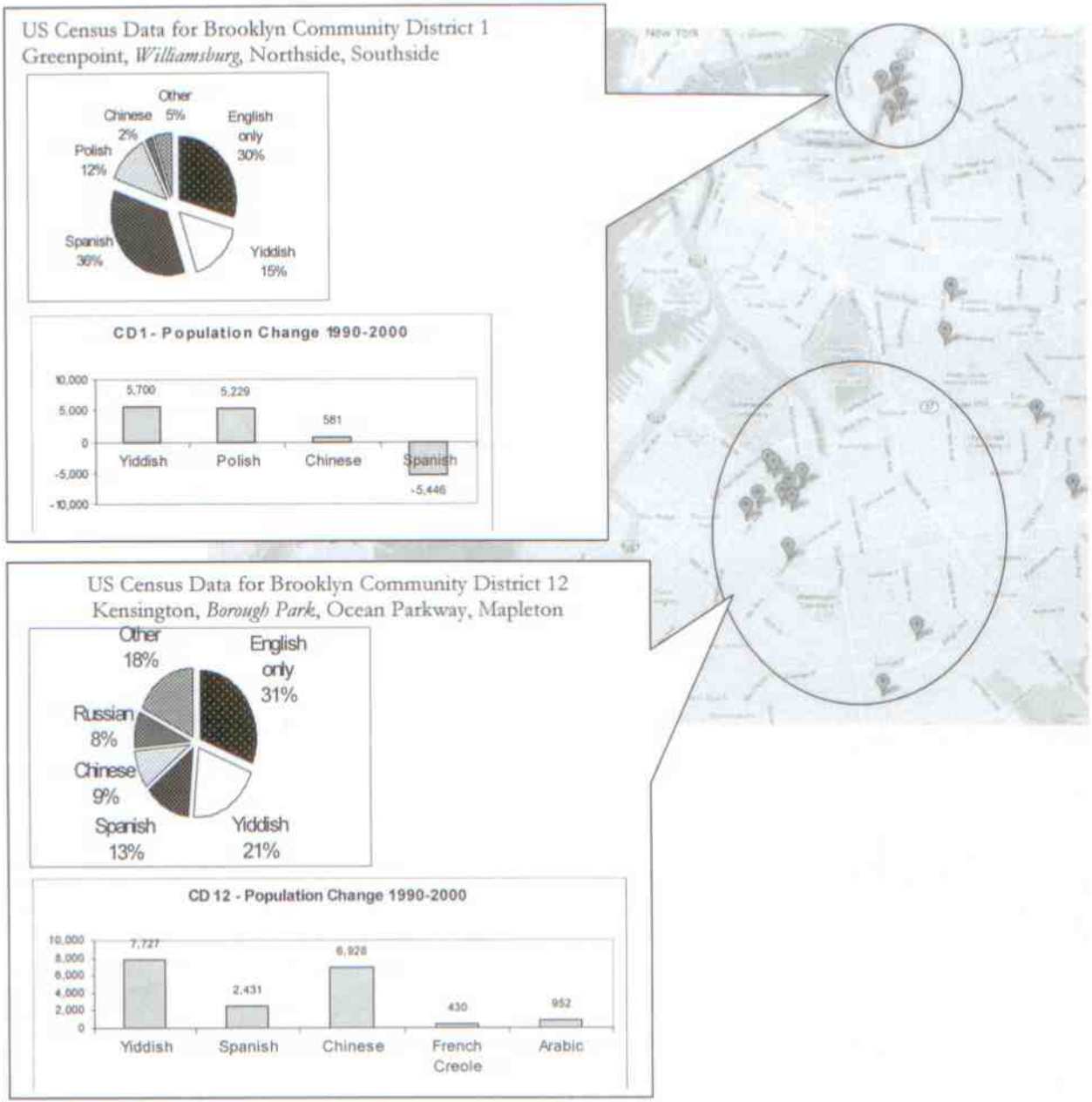
While it now provides services to an exceptionally broad cross-section of diverse cultural and ethnic groups, the Yiddish-speaking Hasidic children still represent a substantial proportion of its population: out of 2,257 children enrolled in education programs (between 0 and 5), 1,218 (that is 53.9%) have Yiddish as a Home Language according to YVY central enrolment database. Across all education programs at YVY, more than 20% of the children qualify for an Individualized Education Plan that enables YVY Special Education services to address the learning needs of these children who exhibit delayed or impaired development. Given the number of Yiddish-speaking children who exhibit typical and atypical development served by Yeled V'Yalda, it is not surprising that professionals working there have expressed the needs for language assessments tools adapted to Yiddish-speaking children.

### **3. Conducting the first study<sup>1</sup> on the acquisition of Yiddish by Hasidic children**

#### **3.1 Challenges**

At least three obstacles had prevented the study of the acquisition of Yiddish by Hasidic children. First Yiddish is not viewed as a legitimate object of study by Yiddish-speaking Hasidim- in that it distracts from religious studies. Yiddish is assigned such a high cultural value that it cannot be compared with other languages (Isaacs, 1999, 2004). Secondly Hasidic communities value the religious education of men over their secular knowledge. Women are encouraged more than men to pursue a slightly higher level of secular

Figure 1: Yeled VYalda locations (indicated with markers) and US census figures for Brooklyn Community Districts 1 & 12



vocational education. However traditionally college studies are eschewed. This varies across individuals and religious groups and may be currently changing. For instance, YVY has been at the forefront of the professionalization of members of this community by recruiting teachers and therapist with high credentials (the majority of YVY teachers have master degrees) and fostering further professional development. Still education and training tend to focus on vocational professional courses at colleges that accommodate religious needs. In consequence very few members of the communities acquire the research training required to study Yiddish and/or develop language assessment tools for their community. In addition, linguistic descriptions and analyses of

Figure 2: Range of services provided by Yeled v'Yalda Early Childhood Center



Yiddish have neglected the varieties spoken by Hasidim (see review of Jacobs, 2005 by Katz, 2006). According to Katz (2004) “The time has come for modern Yiddish studies to make the study of Hasidic Yiddish language a primary focus of researchers” (p380). Finally it is not always easy for outsiders to become observers of these communities (Isaacs, 1999, 2004).

These obstacles were overcome by a number of factors. The programs run by YVY comply with the policies of the organizations that fund them. While Head Start policies have always emphasized the whole development of the child, more recently they have become more concerned with the acquisition of language and pre-literacy skills in preschool. This focus in turn has had an impact on the realization of the specific needs of children whose home-language is not English at a national level (e.g. IRA & NIH, 2007). The professionals at YVY that serve almost 70% of English Language Learners have also become aware of these needs. For instance all Head Start children have to undergo developmental screenings within 45 days following their enrolment that constitute the first step towards a full evaluation if any developmental problems are identified. These screenings include the assessment of language skills. Currently these assessments are available in English and in Spanish but not in the many other languages spoken by pre-school children in the US, including Yiddish. Secondly two reports that relied on questionnaire and interview data included among their participants speech and language pathologists who work at YVY and documented the needs for better assessment tools for Yiddish (Frenkel, 2000, Lubinsky, Zeller & Sontag, 2006). YVY is a dynamic organization with strong leadership that responded to these educational and clinical needs of the Yiddish-speaking populations by appointing a developmental psycholinguist specialized in cross-linguistic studies (i.e. the author) as director of policy for research and education and by creating a research institute.

At the time of her appointment at YVY the developmental psycholinguist (i.e. the author) was teaching in a department of Speech and Language pathology that trains a few of the Yiddish-speaking therapists working at YVY. In this context she was already supervising a masters students project that aimed at developing a Yiddish language screening tool for infants and toddlers. Her appointment at YVY extended the potential of this project and facilitated the development of innovative research strategies and data collection procedures adapted to the participating population that are described below.

### 3.2. Developing appropriate research strategies

#### 3.2.1 Methodological procedure

The decision to adapt the Mac Arthur Communicative Development Inventory (henceforth MBCDI) (Fenson, 1993 et al.) was motivated by several factors:

- (i) By the time this project was started the MBCDI had been adapted successfully to 38 languages that exhibit different typological features and that are tied to different cultures;

- (ii) Studies conducted on the original American English MBDCI and a few other adaptations to other languages have demonstrated its reliability, validity and predictive value- hence its usefulness for clinicians evaluating infants and toddlers (e.g. Jackson-Maldonado et al., 2003);
- (iii) The MBDCI and other types of inventories tapping the lexical and morphosyntactic abilities of children have been shown to exhibit reliability not only for monolinguals (e.g. Reese & Read, 2000) but also for bilingual children (Patterson, 1998, Rescorla & Achenbach, 2002, De Houwer & Bornstein, 2007);
- (iv) It is a non-invasive methodology: parents are asked to complete a questionnaire that taps the language skills of their children. Therefore it is adapted to a population that is not used to outside observers;
- (v) In a relatively short time it is possible to collect data on a substantial number of participants, a strategy that was important for this project for different reasons explained below.

Lessons learned from the adaptations of other MBDCI were taken into account. For instance, there has been three MBDCI adaptations to Spanish for users of Cuban, Mexican and European Spanish varieties. According to Proctor (2006), the use of these distinct adaptations is problematic in the United States where a) children may be raised hearing different varieties of Spanish and b) varieties that may be distant from each other in the geographical areas the speakers come from are likely to come into contact and influence each other especially in densely populated urban areas (e.g. Otheguy, Zentella & Livert, 2007).

From a research perspective, a number of issues both complicated this study and made it theoretically relevant for the field of bilingual development. Only anecdotal evidence was available regarding the demographic and linguistic contexts in which Yiddish-learning infants and toddlers are raised. This is why in addition to the Yiddish adaptation of the MBDCI, a detailed background questionnaire was adapted from the one developed by Jackson-Maldonado et al. (2003) in collaboration with professionals at YVY who are themselves members of the Yiddish-speaking Hasidic community (reproduced in table 1 below). The rationale behind each question is explained below.

1.b Many studies on the development of early cognitive abilities, including language have reported differences between girls and boys. There is currently a debate in the field on whether gender factors are sometimes overridden by effects of birth order/sibling position.

2.a and 2.b Models of development make claims about milestones in relation to chronological age and it is typically on this basis (i.e. delayed development) that clinical cases are first identified.

3a, 3b, 3c and 8 Three studies have considered the effects of birth order on monolingual development. Children are less supportive conversational partners than mothers. So while mothers' language input to their first born children is not affected by such skills input to later born children is affected (Hoff-Ginsberg & Krueger, 1991). The characteristics of the language input of American-English speaking mothers to their first born have been found to positively contribute to their morphosyntactic development (Hoff-Ginsberg, 1998). Allen (1996) observed that Inuktitut-speaking children with fewer siblings were acquiring morphosyntax faster. She suggested that the language input of older siblings close in age may provide an immature language model that delays morphosyntactic development. However Allen (1996) was not able to systematically test her hypothesis given the small number of participants in her study. To date these specific effects of birth order effects have been examined on monolingual development and in families with a maximum of four siblings but there is no reason why they should not apply to bilingual development and/or larger families. Studies on birth order effects in bilingual development have reported that 1<sup>st</sup> born tend to become more proficient speakers of the home/minority language than later born who are exposed to their first born speaking the majority/school language. Given the large number of siblings of most participants identified after the data were collected on two cohorts of children, this factor may play a very important role in this population with respect to the vitality of Yiddish, which is why this question was added before the data were collected on a new cohort of children.

4, 5, 6, 7 These questions are typical of language background information questionnaires. They aim at controlling for the fact that infants and toddlers' early and subsequent language development is affected by their hearing status and for the fact that they may already have or they may be likely to develop (given the family history) language problems.



Table 1 Background information questionnaire (shaded question are those for which the answers were open)

<b>1b Gender</b>					
Female			Male		
<b>2.a How old is your child (between 14 and 36 months)?</b>					
<b>2.b Date of birth</b>					
<b>2.c Today's date</b>					
<b>3.a Does your child have any siblings?</b>					
Yes			No		
<b>3.b. If yes How many? Is your child the oldest, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> etc?</b>					
<b>3. c Please list them in order with their dates of birth and gender</b>					
Table provides with columns for ranking of older and younger siblings, dates of birth and gender					
<b>4. Were there any complications during pregnancy (premature etc)?</b>					
Yes			No		
<b>5. Does your child have hearing difficulties?</b>					
Yes			No		
<b>6. Did you child have any serious illness?</b>					
Yes			No		
<b>7. b Is there a family history of language disorders (dyslexia etc)?</b>					
Yes			No		
<b>8.a has your child been exposed to Yiddish and English from birth?</b>					
Yes			No		
<b>8.b if not at approximately what age (in months) was your child first exposed to Yiddish?... English?....</b>					
<b>8.c If your child has siblings what language(s) do they tend to use with each other:</b>					
Only Yiddish		Half Yiddish Half English		Mostly Yiddish (i.e. 90%-75% of the time)	Mostly English (i.e. 90%-75% of the time)
<b>9. Approximately how much is your child exposed to:</b>					
Yiddish 100%	Yiddish 90% and English 10%	Yiddish 75% and English 25%	Yiddish 50% and English 50%	Yiddish 25% and English 75%	Yiddish 10% and English 90%
<b>10.a Do you/other caregivers regularly read books to your child?</b>					
Yes			No		
<b>10.b If yes, how often:</b>					
Once a month		Once a week	2/3 times a week	Everyday	
<b>10.c What proportion of time do you/other caregivers spend reading in Yiddish and in English to your child?</b>					
Yiddish 100%	Yiddish 90% and English 10%	Yiddish 75% and English 25%	Yiddish 50% and English 50%	Yiddish 25% and English 75%	Yiddish 10% and English 90%
<b>11.a Has the father been exposed to Yiddish since birth?</b>					
Yes			No		
<b>11.b If not, at what age did the father start learning to speak Yiddish?</b>					
<b>11.c The father speaks which of the varieties below?</b>					
Hasidic/Hungarian	Hasidic/Polish	Hasidic/Russian	Lithuanian (Latvish)	Other (please specify)	
<b>11.d What language(s) does the father use with the child?</b>					
Only Yiddish	Half Yiddish Half English	Mostly Yiddish (i.e. 90%-75% of the time)		Mostly English (i.e. 90%-75% of the time)	
<b>12.a Has the mother been exposed to Yiddish since birth?</b>					
Yes			No		
<b>12.b If not, at what age did the mother start learning to speak Yiddish?</b>					
<b>12.c The mother speaks which of the varieties below?</b>					
Hasidic/Hungarian	Hasidic/Polish	Hasidic/Russian	Lithuanian (Latvish)	Other (please specify)	
<b>12.d What language(s) does the mother use with the child?</b>					
Only Yiddish	Half Yiddish Half English	Mostly Yiddish (i.e. 90%-75% of the time)		Mostly English (i.e. 90%-75% of the time)	
<b>13. Who participates on the day-today care of your child (check all that apply)</b>					
Home-based Early Head Start		Center-based Early Head Start		Mother/female guardian	Father/Male guardian
Non-parent caregiver (e.g. grandparent, nanny) in your home (____ hours/week)			Other, please explain..... (hours/week)		
<b>14. Occupation. Please give a specific (e.g. computer technician, dental assistant, deli manager) rather than a general category (e.g., medical field, owner, self-employed)</b>					
Mother	Occupation	Description	Father	Occupation	Description
<b>15. Education. Please circle the highest grade completed. Use 12 for high school graduate, 16 for college graduate and 18 for advanced degree</b>					
Mother	6 to 18		Father	6 to 18	

8a and 8b Although the Critical Period Hypothesis for language acquisition that originally postulated puberty as the end of the period during which language learning abilities are optimal (Lenneberg, 1969) has very much been questioned, age of acquisition is still considered an important factor. Current studies tend to demonstrate that the decrease in the ability to learn a language may be more gradient than was originally proposed by Lenneberg (1969). According to recent studies, the developmental trajectory of sequential childhood bilinguals (that is children who acquire a second language before they fully master their first language, which is the case of many pre-school English Language Learners) shares similarities with late L2 rather than L1 acquisition pattern (e.g. Yarmolinskaya & Barriere, 2005). More studies on different ages of acquisition in young children will help us better understand the importance and impact of this factor on early stages of language development.

9: Theories and models of language acquisition vary with respect to the role they assign to the input. Both emergentist (Bates, 1993) and constructivist (Tomasello, 2000) approaches to language acquisition assign a crucial role to the input that they conceptualize as the driving force underpinning the language acquisition process. In contrast, according to maturationist/generativist approaches, the child's contribution to the acquisition process is conceptualized as the driving force while the input plays a minor role. Although these three theories were originally developed to account for first language acquisition by monolingual children, they must also account for bilingual development and the study of bilingual development can also test the hypotheses based on these theories (Genesee, 2001, Meisel, 2007). Studies to date have focused on balanced bilinguals (exposed to 50% of the time to each of their language) and report same speed and pattern of development for monolinguals and bilinguals in each of their languages (e.g. Sinka & Schelletter, 1998)- that tends to support the generativist/maturationist account. However very few studies have examined the speed and pattern of development of unbalanced bilinguals- i.e. children exposed more to one language than the other. While a few investigators have recently concluded that the development of the weak – i.e. the less often used, less preferred and less developed- language in unbalanced bilinguals exhibits patterns that characterize the acquisition of a Second Language after a first one is fully mastered, the interpretation of their findings has recently been challenged (Meisel, 2007). The characterization of the learning of the weak language has to be systematically investigated for conclusions to be drawn (Meisel, 2007). This issue also has important educational and clinical implications to decide whether children exposed to the same language combinations but who do not receive the same percentage of input to each language should be evaluated in the same way.

10a, 10b, and 10 c Home literacy activities are correlated with oral language development in monolingual children, including their vocabulary and grammatical skills (Tabors, 2005). One of the interesting aspects of bilingual development is that not all bilingual children are exposed to literacy in their two languages and the amount and proportion of literacy activities in each language may vary from child to child and may differ from the percentage of oral exposure to each language.

11a and 11b and 12 a, 12b YVY serves a range of religious Yiddish-speaking groups that differ in their use of Yiddish (Isaacs, 2000): they include Belz, Bobovers, Chabads, Gers, Litvish and Satmars. The history of each group and individual has had an impact on the intergenerational transmission of Yiddish that in a few cases has been interrupted and is being revived which results in the non-native use of Yiddish by a few parents. The language produced by late language learners typically differs from that of native speakers especially with respect to pronunciation and morphology, with obligatory morphological markers being omitted (Epstein, Flynn & Martohardjono, 1996). These characteristics impact on language development. For instance, the language development of children exposed to non-native Sign Language input exhibits a developmental trajectory that is different from those exposed to native input and the structures they produce surpass those produced by their non-native parents (Singleton & Newport, 2005). This issue has not been systematically investigated in groups of bilingual children exposed to spoken languages.

11c and 12c The different Hasidic groups mentioned above do not only differ in their patterns of use of Yiddish with respect to percentage of use in relation to English and to native versus non-native input, they also differ in terms of geographical areas their parents, grand-parents, great-grandparents etc came from. The long history of Yiddish and the spread of its use over a very large territory in Europe (between Alsace and Eastern Russia and Lithuania to Romania) explain the development of distinct varieties (Birbaum, 1979, Baumgarten, 2002). The use of Yiddish in the US has been documented in a number of studies (e.g. Fishman, 1952, Hudson-Edwards, 1981, Jochnowitz, 1981, Levine, 2000, Peletz, 1990, Kronovet, 2005) but the data have been collected on other

