

Linguistic Style and Mosaic Identity: Phonological variation and Reform American Judaism

Erez Levon, New York University

This paper examines topic- and audience- conditioned variation (Bell 2001) in the speech of two members of the Reform Jewish community in New York City. I explore the ways in which these two speakers vary the realization of word-final /t/, and negotiate between the indexation of two distinctive identities; a Reform Jewish identity as well as a local, i.e., New York City, identity. Previous researchers have examined the linguistic practice of various Jewish communities in the United States (Fishman 1985, Fader 2000, Benor 2001), yet no one has, to my knowledge, focused on the Reform community. Ethnographic research has argued that the Reform community in the United States is in a process of dissolution, from a coherent, bounded group, to one largely assimilated to the American norm. My research explores the salience of membership in the Reform Jewish community for the two informants, and how the linguistic indexation of this membership exists in situated contact with the linguistic expression of their New York identity.

Benor (2001) examined the realization of word-final /t/ in an ultra-Orthodox Jewish community in Northern California. Based on her research, Benor (2001) was able to correlate the attestation of final-released /t/ with the indexation of intelligence or authority in the community, a stance ideologically linked to masculinity. I examine this same variable in the speech of two adolescents, who both self-identify as active members of the Reform Jewish community in New York City. The informants, both native-New Yorkers, are good friends, attend the same public High School in Manhattan, and belong to the same Reform synagogue. Following preliminary ethnographic observation, the two informants were recorded in three settings: in the classroom of the religious school, at the Jewish youth group meeting, and in a group interview at one of the informant's homes.

Milroy's (1980) social network theory, combined with Bell's (2001) theory of referee design, is used to examine the variable pronunciation of word-final /t/. To account for the social motivation of observed allophonic variation, I combine traditional Varbrul analysis with trinomial quantitative analyses (T-varb). This allows for a more articulated examination of the dependent variable. Unlike Benor (2001), whose Varbrul results show final-/t/ release to be the significant sociolinguistic factor, my trinomial results show that it is the interaction between final-/t/ *release* and final-/t/ *glottalization* that is relevant in analyzing my data. I argue that both these allophonic variants are indexical, and that my informants vary their usage of these variables across the axes of topic and audience in order to negotiate aspects of their social personae, in this case final-/t/ release to index a Reform Jewish identity, and final-/t/ glottalization to index a local, New York identity.

KEYWORDS: Jewish identity, trinomial analysis, ideology

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