Non-vernacular language in action: Ashkenazic Hebrew in 21st-century diglossic Hasidic communities

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Abstract

This article is devoted to the role of contemporary Ashkenazic Hebrew in Hasidic communities in English-speaking countries, presented within a theoretical framework that we refer to as *internal diglossia* and *external bilingualism*. It has typically been believed that Ashkenazic Hebrew, the variety of Hebrew historically used in writing in Central and Eastern European Jewish communities in a diglossic situation alongside the vernacular Yiddish, fell out of use in the first half of the 20th century and was replaced by either the majority languages of countries with large Jewish populations (e.g. English, French, Russian), or by Israeli Hebrew as a language of both speech and writing. However, contrary to this widespread assumption, the traditional Eastern European form of Hebrew continues to thrive as a productive written language alongside Yiddish and English in the main Hasidic centres outside of Israel (with the biggest communities in the New York area in the US and London in the UK). This 21st-century Ashkenazic Hebrew variety has its own linguistic features that differ significantly from Israeli Hebrew (Kahn and Yampolskaya 2022). Moreover, the acquisition of Ashkenazic Hebrew is very unusual in that it is a non-vernacular language which is learned without formal grammatical instruction to a very high degree and is employed productively within Hasidic communities. The use of the language is heavily informed by sociolinguistic axes, chiefly social status and gender, as it is strongly associated with the male intellectual elite. The article examines the acquisition and use of contemporary Ashkenazic Hebrew among men and women in Hasidic communities as well as user attitudes to the language in terms of gender, social status, and holiness.

Keywords
Hasidic, Hebrew, Ashkenazic, sociolinguistics, language acquisition, diglossia, non-vernacular, written language

1. Introduction
1.1 Theoretical framework: internal diglossia and external bilingualism
Within Jewish Studies, it is generally accepted that Hebrew and Yiddish in the historical Jewish communities of Eastern Europe (see 1.2 for details) constituted a case of diglossia, whereby Hebrew played the role of an H (high) language, and Yiddish served as a L (low) language (e.g. Glinert 1987; Harshav 1990; Seidman 1993; Bunis 2013). Indeed, Ferguson's (1959) classic definition of the term *diglossia* pinpoints numerous quite specific features which are intrinsic to the Hebrew-Yiddish relationship: 'Diglossia is a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation' (Ferguson 1959, 336). As one can see in this definition, Ferguson pays considerable attention to the specific properties of the H variety in diglossia, which is a vehicle of 'fundamental values of the community' (Ferguson 1959, 338) and which is acquired via education rather than family communication, where it is not normally used. This unique functioning of an H language is particularly relevant to the study of Hebrew in Yiddish-speaking communities. However, a problem arises when applying Ferguson's ideas to the Hebrew-Yiddish relationship: Ferguson clearly refers to two related language varieties (e.g. Modern Standard Arabic vs colloquial Egyptian Arabic), with situations involving two non-related languages – e.g. Hebrew (Semitic) and Yiddish (Germanic) – excluded from his conceptual framework.

Fishman (1967) extended the concept of diglossia to any codes – from non-related languages to different stylistic registers in one language – if the roles of these codes are

compartmentalized. Essentially, the purpose of his article is to correlate the term *bilingualism* on the part of psychologists (meaning *individual bilingualism* in contemporary terminology) and *diglossia* on the part of sociologists (meaning *societal bilingualism* in contemporary terminology, understood by extension as a characteristic of a society, where two or more linguistic varieties of any affinity are in use). Fishman's (extended) diglossia seemingly allows the term *diglossia* to be applied to Hebrew-Yiddish Jewish communities. However, Fishman discarded all of Ferguson's specific characteristics of language use – except for the functional compartmentalization of the varieties that to some extent is observed in most speech communities, even monolingual ones – which makes the application of the term pointless for our studies. As Kaye observes, 'What is the point of the term, then, if the concept is watered down?' (Kaye 2001, 121). This discrepancy in the scope of the term *diglossia* has caused a wide polemic among sociolinguists, resulting in a state whereby different scholars use the term *diglossia* with fundamentally different meanings (e.g. Ferguson 1991).

A possible solution was suggested by Hudson in his influential article 'Outline of the Theory of Diglossia' (2002). In this article Hudson scrupulously analyses not only Ferguson's classic 1959 article, but also his later writings on diglossia (1993a; 1993b; 1968; 1991), and the large corpus of academic writings of various authors on diglossia that followed Ferguson (1959). Trying to distinguish the concept of *diglossia* from *societal bilingualism* in the most functional and efficient way for the benefit of sociolinguistic theory, Hudson makes two major conclusions especially relevant for the present article. First, he claims that 'the codes involved in this configuration [diglossia] might be varieties of totally unrelated languages' (Hudson 2022: 40). For our research, this means that the term *diglossia* is applicable for Hebrew and Yiddish. Second, he argues repeatedly that the fundamental characteristic of diglossia is the specific use of H which is acquired via education and not from the family: parents never speak H to each other, and H is not normally used for conversational purposes. In other words, the key feature of diglossia that distinguishes it from societal bilingualism is 'the lack of opportunity for the acquisition of H as a native variety, the resulting absence of native speakers of H' (Hudson 2022, 40). Therefore, in the present article we follow Hudson's understanding of the term diglossia.

Our research on Hebrew-Yiddish diglossia highlights the necessity to add one more requirement to the definition of the term, namely the productive use of the H language. This characteristic is implied in the classic works on diglossia by Ferguson, Fishman, Hudson, and others, but is not stated explicitly enough, apparently because in all the particular cases examined in these works H is used productively, and as such this feature is understood as a matter of course. When discussing possible scenarios resulting in the disruption of diglossia, Ferguson mentions the following: 'H fades away and becomes a learned or liturgical language studied only by scholars or specialists and not used actively in the community' (Ferguson 1959, 339). This quotation shows that for Ferguson a language that is not used actively in the community indicates the disruption of diglossia. This linguistic situation is commonly referred to as post-diglossia (e.g. Hudson 2002; Williams 2009; Goutsos 2009; Sayahi 2014). For our purposes, the requirement of productive use of the H variety clarifies the distinction in the functioning of the Hebrew and Aramaic languages in Ashkenazic Jewish communities. Indeed, while traditional Jewish education for boys as well as for advanced adult male scholarship implies profound expertise in Aramaic texts (e.g. the Talmud and certain parts of the liturgy such as the *Kaddish*) as well as Hebrew ones, from the Late Middle Ages new texts were commonly created in Hebrew rather than in Aramaic (the Passover song *Ḥad Gadya* being a notable exception). Though many genres of Hebrew writing (e.g. legal texts) contain numerous Aramaic words and expressions, Hebrew remains the matrix language of these texts. Hence, we argue that the use of Hebrew and Yiddish is best described as diglossia, whereas Aramaic

functions as a post-diglossic language, i.e. as a legacy of the prior historical Hebrew-Aramaic diglossia (Siegal 2013).

Finally, we must include in the theoretical conceptualization of the linguistic situation in Ashkenazic Jewish communities the fact that in addition to active use of Hebrew and Yiddish, Jews typically had some proficiency in a co-territorial language or languages as well. Max Weinreich referred to this type of multilingualism as *external bilingualism*, i.e. the use of the language/s of the co-territorial majority, and *internal bilingualism*, what we here call Hebrew-Yiddish diglossia (Weinreich 1959, 2008, 247–314). Weinreich himself did not actually use the concept of diglossia, but the opposition of internal vs external multilingualism itself is very fruitful for our analytical purposes. Therefore, we suggest using the twinned concepts of *internal diglossia* and *external bilingualism* for the examination of the complex multilingualism in historical Jewish communities in Eastern Europe and contemporary Hasidic communities alike. The distinction between internal and external multilingualism implies that internal languages are those which are understood by the speakers as appropriate for intracommunal needs only: thus, for example, the use of Yiddish by outsiders would be considered a deviation from the norm. The opposite, however, is possible within the boundaries of normality: external languages are sometimes used for in-group needs (see e.g. Benor 2019). This model, whereby internal and external multilingualism are distinguished, allows us to foreground typological similarities between different Yiddish-speaking communities both cross-geographically and diachronically, as long as the internal diglossia remains stable. Indeed, Jewish communities of the 19th century in Eastern Europe used Ukrainian, Polish, Russian, Lithuanian, German, etc. as their external languages, while employing Hebrew and Yiddish internally. Contemporary Hasidic communities, as will be shown in the present article, have preserved the historical internal Hebrew-Yiddish diglossia, while their co-territorial language varies: English in the USA, Canada, and the UK, Modern Israeli Hebrew in Israel, French or Flemish in Belgium.

1.2 Ashkenazic Hebrew and Diaspora Hasidic Jewry
This article provides a sociolinguistic overview of the role of Ashkenazic Hebrew among Hasidic[1] Jews living in the (primarily English-speaking) Diaspora in the 21st-century. Ashkenazic Hebrew is a particular variety of Hebrew with its own phonology as well as its own morphological, syntactic, and lexical characteristics that served for many centuries as the main high-register written and recited non-vernacular language of Central and Eastern European Jewry. (See Katz 1993; Eldar 2013; Glinert 2013; Kahn 2009, 2015; Kahn and Yampolskaya forthcoming for discussion of various aspects of historical Ashkenazic Hebrew.) Ashkenazic Hebrew (along with earlier historical varieties of Hebrew including that of the Bible, Mishnah, and other rabbinic and medieval Jewish literature) had a prominent presence in the synagogue, home, and study hall, as well as in numerous written genres. Hebrew, in all its various historical and textual forms, was termed *loshn koydesh*, the Ashkenazic Hebrew/Yiddish pronunciation of לשון קודש *ləšon qodeš* 'holy tongue'. Though widely and productively used in both writing and recited speech, *loshn koydesh* was not an everyday language of communication; instead, Yiddish, the spoken language of Ashkenazic Jewry from the medieval period onwards, was used for most vernacular purposes. The relationship between *loshn koydesh* and Yiddish was a particularly long-term and stable case of diglossia, whereby *loshn koydesh* played the role of an H language, and Yiddish served as a L language. To some extent, the role and status of *loshn koydesh* among Central and Eastern European Jews parallels that of Latin in medieval and Renaissance Christian Europe (e.g. Mostert 2016), which served

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[1] Followers of Hasidism, a strictly Orthodox Jewish spiritual movement that emerged in Eastern Europe in the late 18th century and became prominent over the course of the 19th century. See Biale (2018) for a discussion of the origins and development of Hasidism.

as an H language while local vernaculars acted as L languages. In addition to this internal Jewish diglossia, Jews spoke and wrote non-Jewish languages (e.g. Polish, Ukrainian, etc.) with varying levels of proficiency. As argued in 1.1, this specific Eastern European Jewish type of complex multilingualism is best referred to as internal diglossia and external bilingualism. Hasidic Jews, who had a significant presence in Eastern European Jewish life by the end of the 19th century, were subject to this same system of internal diglossia and external bilingualism as the rest of the Eastern European Jewish population.

Between the late 19th century and the middle of the 20th century, various interlinked factors beginning with widespread emigration away from Eastern Europe to North America, Western Europe, Palestine, and elsewhere, and culminating in the destruction of much of the Ashkenazic Jewish population in the Holocaust, led to the large-scale disintegration of the traditional Eastern European Hebrew-Yiddish diglossic system in favour of monolingualism (see e.g. Bartal 1993 for one case study of this process, the switch to Israeli Hebrew). Hasidim (and, to a lesser extent, non-Hasidic Haredim, i.e. strictly Orthodox, communities) have for the most part been the only Eastern European Jews to maintain the traditional system in the postwar period. Just as Hasidic Jews have retained Yiddish as their main vernacular until the present day (see Isaacs 1999b; Assouline 2007, 2014; Krogh 2018; Bleaman 2018; Belk, Kahn, and Szendrői 2020; Belk, Kahn, Szendrői, and Yampolskaya 2021 etc.), so too has traditional Ashkenazic Hebrew continued to be used productively in the new Hasidic population centres that emerged in the Diaspora primarily in the 1940s and 1950s.[2] The largest of these are located in the New York area in the USA and London in the UK, followed by Antwerp in Belgium and the Montreal area in Canada. In these areas, in addition to the traditional internal Hebrew-Yiddish diglossic system, Hasidic speakers have also maintained the historical external bilingualism, though the Eastern European co-territorial languages have been replaced by the dominant languages of their new neighbours (English, French, and Flemish). Though there is no precise number, there are roughly an estimated 750,000 Hasidic Jews worldwide (Biale et al. 2018).

Contemporary Hasidic society is very tight-knit and is organized around principles of stringent adherence to Jewish law; rigorous gender segregation; high level of education in the Torah, Talmud, and other Jewish textual sources; the importance of family; close communal ties; the maintenance of traditions; and avoidance of the outside world where possible. Hasidim generally belong to a particular affiliation or dynasty centred around the figure of the *rebbe,* a venerated spiritual leader. Most of the dynasties are named after the place of their original emergence in Eastern Europe. Some of the more prominent Hasidic affiliations include Satmar, Vizhnitz, Belz, Bobov, Ger, Skver, Karlin and Chabad. The various Hasidic affiliations have different customs and interpretations of numerous issues, with some (such as Satmar) being regarded as stricter and more traditional, while others (such as Karlin) are perceived as more moderate. Chabad is a special case in the Hasidic world, as they engage much more with outside society in their practices of Jewish outreach, and tend to speak less Yiddish and more of the dominant languages of the countries where they live.

Nevertheless, the affiliations all resemble each other in their largely shared history, beliefs, values, and worldviews, and regard themselves as part of a larger Hasidic community. Hasidic communities are characterized by a strict and multilayered social hierarchy shaped around class and gender. See Heilman (1992); Biale et al. (2018); and Wodziński (2018) for detailed discussions of contemporary Hasidic society. The Hebrew-Yiddish diglossia intersects with and mirrors this hierarchy, meaning that the study of Ashkenazic Hebrew in contemporary

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[2] The situation in Israel is different and as such Israeli data have been excluded from this research; see section 1.2 for an explanation.

Hasidic communities is inextricably linked to concepts of masculinity, adulthood, prestige, and social success, as will be examined in this article.

1.3 Research questions and methodology
The case of Ashkenazic Hebrew in the contemporary world constitutes a rare opportunity to examine the mechanisms of acquisition, as well as the role of and attitudes to, a thriving yet non-vernacular language. Our main aims are to explore questions such as how children acquire Ashkenazic Hebrew, which as mentioned above has the unusual distinction of being a non-spoken language which is nevertheless a community language (rather than a historical language such as Latin or Ancient Greek); how boys' education differs from that of girls' with respect to the acquisition of Ashkenazic Hebrew; how adults employ the language productively; and how members of Hasidic communities perceive the language. The last point includes questions of whether they regard Ashkenazic Hebrew as high-status in comparison to their own spoken languages (primarily Yiddish, with some English), whether they distinguish it from Israeli Hebrew or regard it as the same language, whether they feel that skills in Ashkenazic Hebrew are a marker of social status, and whether women and men report similar or different attitudes to the language given the drastically different gender roles and experiences within Hasidic society. Our study can serve as a complement to existing research on Hasidic language practices and attitudes, which is mostly about Yiddish but does sometimes touch on Hebrew (see e.g. Glinert and Shilhav 1991; Glinert 1993; Isaacs 1999a; Baumel 2006; Fader 2009; Assouline 2013, 2017, 2018; Reiser 2020; Munro 2022); on Hasidic language pedagogy, which has generally focused on Yiddish rather than Hebrew (Abraham 1997; Abraham-Glinert 1999; Glinert 1999; Bogoch 1999; Mitchell 2002-3; Gonshor and Shaffir 2004; Kutzik 2018; Belk et al. 2022); and on diglossia, both with respect to Jewish languages (Fishman 1967; Glinert 1987; Myhill 2004), and more broadly (Ferguson 1959; Fishman 1971; Kaye 2001; Auer 2005; Snow 2013; Rutten 2016). Within the latter context, contemporary Ashkenazic Hebrew is a particularly noteworthy case study for several reasons. First, unlike well-known diglossias such as Arabic, the Hebrew-Yiddish diglossia consists of two genealogically unrelated languages (one being Afroasiatic and the other Indo-European). Second, it is unusual cross-linguistically in that it is a diglossic system wherein both the H and the L language are minority languages, rather than one being an official language imposed by the state or other outside powers. Third, it provides a fruitful example of a diglossic situation with a strong and highly entrenched gender component, whereby use of the H language is almost exclusively the preserve of men.

This study is based on fieldwork including participant observation in Yiddish-speaking Hasidic communities undertaken between 2019 and 2023 in the UK, USA, Canada, Belgium, and Israel, as well as interviews on various linguistic and sociolinguistic topics with over 50 male and female participants of different ages and Hasidic affiliations. For the present article, these datasets were complemented by an additional set of focused in-depth semi-structured interviews specifically dedicated to the acquisition of and attitudes to Ashkenazic Hebrew. These interviews were conducted in English and Yiddish with Hasidic adults ranging in age from their early 20s to their 60s who grew up in London and the New York area, the communities which together contain the majority of Hasidic Jews outside of Israel.[3] There were 15 participants in total, of which 8 were male and 7 female. 5 participants were from the New York area and 10 participants were from London. Participants identified with four different Hasidic affiliations, namely Satmar, Slonim, Skver, and Chabad; in addition, some described

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[3] Most of the large Hasidic centres in the Diaspora are located in English-speaking countries and therefore our fieldwork focused on participants from these countries. One of our interviewees is originally from Antwerp but was educated partly in London and continues to live there, meaning that their experience is relevant for the issues discussed in this study and their data have been included along with the other London participants.

their affiliation as 'Klal Hasidish', meaning 'general Hasidic', i.e. Hasidic but not associated with a particular dynasty.

We have chosen to focus on Hasidim rather than non-Hasidic Haredim because the latter tend to use less Hebrew productively and are less likely to use Yiddish as their vernacular. As such, non-Hasidic Haredim are not typically suitable for a study on the acquisition and productive use of Ashkenazic Hebrew and its diglossic relationship with Yiddish. Similarly, we have excluded Hasidim who were born and raised in Israel because their language is influenced by Israeli Hebrew, which obscures the picture regarding acquisition and use of Ashkenazic Hebrew. The Hebrew produced by Israeli Hasidim (and Haredim more broadly) is a topic deserving of separate research (see Assouline 2013a, 2013b).

We included participants of both genders and a range of social positions within Hasidic society in order to capture the differences in experience of Ashkenazic Hebrew between these groups. Interviews were conducted orally and recorded in audio format. Interview questions were structured around a series of topics corresponding to the sections and subsections of this article appearing below. Interviews were approximately one hour in length and participants were given the opportunity to describe their views and experiences in their own words.

Interview participants whom we quote directly in the article are indicated by a code consisting of their place of origin/education (i.e. NY for New York, LN for London), followed by their gender (M for male, F for female), followed by a number serving to distinguish them from other quoted participants of the same location and gender. Note that not all interview participants are quoted directly in the article, but the selected quotes are representative of the participant pool as a whole. Direct quotes from participants appearing in this article are presented in English, although some of the interviews were conducted in English and others were conducted in Yiddish. When an interview has been translated from Yiddish, this is indicated in a footnote directing readers to an appendix, where the original Yiddish version can be found. All English translations of original Yiddish interviews are our own. Due to the extensive nature of code-switching and code-mixing in multilingual Hasidic society, certain Hebrew and Yiddish elements appear in the interviews which were conducted in English, and we have retained these elements in our citations and have explained them in footnotes.

All Yiddish and Ashkenazic Hebrew elements in the body of the article appear in the standard YIVO romanization system, which is the most widespread transliteration for Yiddish and the easiest to adapt for Ashkenazic Hebrew, as the two languages have a largely shared phonology. For example, we represent the term לשון קודש *ləšon qodeš* 'holy tongue' as *loshn koydesh.* By contrast, most interview citations are presented in a slightly adjusted version of the YIVO romanization system that better reflects the speech of our participants. They, like most Hasidim, exhibit a pronunciation which is based on historical Polish-Hungarian Ashkenazic Hebrew and Yiddish phonology (see Katz 1993 and Glinert 2013) rather than the YIVO system, which is based on Lithuanian Ashkenazic Hebrew and Yiddish phonology.[4] For example, in interview quotes we use the spelling *lushn koydesh*, reflecting the participants' pronunciation, instead of *loshn koydesh*. The only exception to this is in quotes from our Chabad participants, as Chabad pronunciation is typically based on Lithuanian Yiddish and therefore resembles that of the standard YIVO system. For example, one Chabad participant uses the pronunciation *loshn koydesh*, and therefore this is the spelling appearing in that interview quote.

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[4] Note that our system is an approximation rather than a technical phonetic representation of the mainstream Hasidic pronunciation of Ashkenazic Hebrew or Yiddish phonology.

2. Young children's acquisition of Hebrew in the home

In Hasidic communities throughout the English-speaking world, both boys and girls begin to acquire some Hebrew skills from very early childhood, hand-in-hand with acquisition of their spoken language (typically Yiddish, in some cases together with English). In the first few years of life, children are exposed to recited Hebrew in various forms including prayers and the names of everyday objects and concepts relevant to Hasidic life. The prayers are typically derived from the Mishnaic and medieval strata of Hebrew, but are recited in Ashkenazic pronunciation. In this early period, children are not typically aware that Hebrew and their vernacular are different languages as the Hebrew is acquired at the same time as the vernacular and forms a prominent part of their early linguistic repertoire. This is reinforced by the fact that Yiddish is replete with Hebrew words and expressions even for very ordinary concepts, e.g. *khaver* 'friend', *mishpokhe* 'family', *ponem* 'face', *beysakise* 'toilet', etc. While, as mentioned above, Hebrew in these communities is a written and recited language rather than a vehicle of everyday communication, the very early (pre-literate) exposure to it in Hasidic communities already serves to highlight the fact that its acquisition is not analogous to that of ancient languages acquired in institutional contexts outside of the Hasidic world such as Greek and Latin.

When they develop the ability to speak, both boys and girls begin to recite short Hebrew prayers and blessings that are learned by heart, increasing in length and number as they grow. These prayers and blessings are typically liturgical language modelled on or deriving from Mishnaic Hebrew, though in some cases they are composed of biblical extracts. Children are not taught the difference between these varieties of Hebrew, and as above, they are all learned according to Ashkenazic pronunciation. These lines are learned and recited *in toto* to a melody without any translation into the vernacular; while children do not understand each word, they learn to associate the blessings with their ritual context (e.g. handwashing, eating, etc.) NYF1 (Skver) summarizes this early introduction to Hebrew blessings as follows:

> You learn to pray by heart. Yes, even before you learn to read. But before that it's just like, by memory. It's almost like a song – you don't understand the words, because there's no distinction between the words. It's just a song. Just, you memorize but without knowing what you're saying.[5]

The diglossic nature of this early-years linguistic repertoire is reflected in the text of popular CDs that comprise a key form of Hasidic children's entertainment. These CDs include Yiddish songs and Hebrew blessings which are chanted by children to musical accompaniment. No explicit distinction between the languages is indicated, though the Hebrew extracts are clearly singled out as elements of high prestige which need to be memorized, and thus play a distinct pragmatic role within the songs. The most well-known series of such CDs is called *Lchaim Kindergarten.* In these CDs, which are aimed at two- to three-year-olds, Hebrew prayers and blessings are framed with Yiddish verses and dialogues that introduce the rituals in a playful manner. The following example is a quotation from one of the songs in the series, which is performed as a dialogue between a father or Hasidic teacher and young boys. The Hebrew blessing on the penultimate line (in bold) can be contrasted with the Yiddish matrix, in that it is singled out as a blessing which is of higher prestige in that it needs to be learned, although no indication is given that it is in a different language than the rest of the song.

– moyshele, moyshele, her zikh ayn.	– Moyshele, Moyshele, listen.
bist a yingele voyl in fayn.	You are a nice and fine boy.

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[5] Interview translated from Yiddish; see Appendix, extract 1.

ofn tish iz broyt faran.	There is bread on the table.
velkhe brokhe makht men dan?	What blessing does one make then?
*– **ha-moytsi leykhem min-u-urets!***	– The One who brings forth bread from the earth!
– oy emes, rikhtik, zayer git!	– Ah, true, right, very good!

Thus, in their earliest years, before beginning to learn to read and write, Hasidic children are already exposed to Hebrew on an everyday basis in the form of chunks of oral texts recited in Ashkenazic pronunciation and embedded in everyday life alongside the Yiddish and/or English vernacular. The fact that the Hebrew texts are linked with blessings means that children form strong associations between the language and holiness, as opposed to the language used for more basic, non-holy communication. This exposure to a huge number of Hebrew texts, most of which are totally incomprehensible, means that from their very earliest years children are introduced to the concept of Hebrew as a sacred and mysterious language.

Up to the age of three, Hasidic boys and girls are largely treated the same in terms of language acquisition, as culturally children aged one to two are regarded simply as infants and there is little noticeable gender distinction. The only distinction is that boys are typically first introduced to the alphabet at the ages of one to two, while girls are not usually exposed to it until slightly later (discussed in section 3). Boys are shown pictures of letters and taught their names in order to familiarize them with the concept of the alphabet and pave the way for them to learn it easily when they begin cheder (the equivalent of primary school for boys in the traditional Jewish educational system). Indeed, it is often a matter of familial pride for boys to recognize letters by the time they start cheder, as this is regarded as a sign of their potential for future scholarly prowess.

From the age of three onwards the distinction between boys and girls becomes paramount, and the acquisition of Hebrew takes on very different trajectories depending on gender. As such, in the following sections we will first provide an overview of girls' (comparatively minimal) acquisition of Hebrew (section 3), and then an overview of boys' (extensive and complex) acquisition (section 5).

3. Girls' acquisition of Hebrew in primary school, secondary school, and seminary

In contrast to their male counterparts, Hasidic girls are not expected to have detailed familiarity with Hebrew or with Hebrew-language Jewish textual sources. As such, Hasidic girls' educational experience is very different from that of boys (in general as well as specifically with respect to the acquisition of Hebrew). While boys are first introduced to certain individual letters of the Hebrew (and Yiddish) alphabet at the age of one or two, with girls this process does not begin until later, around the age of four to five in reception class (in the UK) or kindergarten (in North America). This can take the form of girls being given pictures of individual consonants to take home and colour in as part of their play activities.

Girls begin to learn the alphabet systematically at the age of five in the first year of primary school (UK) or elementary school (North America). At this point, they are introduced to the printed (square/block) variety of the script according to Ashkenazic phonology by means of a traditional system whereby all possible combinations of each consonant and vowel combinations are chanted by the teacher and repeated by the girls (e.g. *kumets alef u, kumets bays bu*[6]). This is supplemented by pictures showing familiar Yiddish/Hebrew words from everyday life that start with the relevant letter, e.g. *beys = balon* 'balloon'; *khes = khale* 'challah', etc. No distinction is made between Hebrew and Yiddish in this respect; the alphabet is presented as 'Jewish' rather than as specifically Hebrew or Yiddish, and girls are not taught any orthographic differences between the two languages.

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[6] *Qameṣ* plus *alef* equals *u* (= *o* as pronounced according to Polish/Hungarian-based Hasidic phonology); *qameṣ* plus *bet* equals *bu* (*bo* as pronounced according to Polish/Hungarian-based Hasidic phonology).

After learning the alphabet and some basic words, girls begin to learn to read the siddur (the daily and Sabbath prayer book, which is written in pointed Hebrew[7]). The main aim of this study is to ensure that girls can understand the everyday prayers that they will recite for the rest of their lives. To this end, the Hebrew prayers are studied and orally translated into Yiddish (or English in some of the less traditional Hasidic affiliations) according to the traditional Eastern European pedagogical method called *taytsh*, which consists of chanting the Hebrew phrase by phrase in Ashkenazic pronunciation followed by its Yiddish translation, all according to a specific singsong melody. After a year of study, around age six, girls are given their own siddur at a celebratory event called a 'siddur party', from which point they are expected to be able to read most basic prayers independently and understand the them to a reasonable extent, though they continue to study the texts and translate them into Yiddish in subsequent years of school.

Girls are first introduced to the handwritten version of the Hebrew/Yiddish alphabet following the siddur party, usually in their second year of primary/elementary school. At this point they also begin studying a second Hebrew text, the biblical book of Psalms. Psalms, referred to by its Hebrew name of *tehillim* in Hasidic communities, is unique among the books of the Bible in that it makes up a prominent element of female textual study and features heavily in women's spiritual life. It is recited by many women on a regular basis either individually or in 'Tehillim groups', female-only gatherings dedicated to the communal recitation of Psalms as a tool for spiritual enrichment and for specific purposes such as healing the sick. As in the case of the siddur, the main goal in institutional study of Psalms is for girls to understand the content of the text because it will play a role in their adult life. The pedagogical approach is the same as for the siddur, based on the *taytsh* method. As girls advance through primary school, a third Hebrew text is added to the curriculum, this time the Mishnaic tractate *Pirke Oves*[8] 'Ethics of the Fathers', a compendium of moral and ethical teachings which is exceptional in the Mishnah as it is the only tractate not to centre around halachic (Jewish legal) discussions.

Apart from Psalms and *Pirke Oves*, Hasidic girls do not typically study the Hebrew Bible or Mishnah in the original Hebrew. This is rooted in a longstanding ambivalence regarding the entire concept of Torah study for girls dating back to the Mishnah itself (*Soṭa* 3:4) and the Talmud (*Soṭa* 21b), where it is stated that 'anyone who teaches his daughter Torah is teaching her licentiousness'. This sentiment is also expressed in medieval Jewish commentaries such as those of Maimonides, where fathers are forbidden from teaching their daughters Torah. While the exact meaning and extent of the prohibition have been the subject of considerable debate over the past several hundred years, in Hasidic communities the entrenched reluctance to teach girls the Torah is reflected in the relative lack of Hebrew textual study. The precise manifestation of this tradition differs among the various Hasidic affiliations: Satmar and smaller Satmar-associated groups avoide study of the Torah for girls altogether; Skver, Belz, and Bobov include small amounts of Hebrew-language biblical texts in the curriculum; Ger, Chabad, and Klal Hasidish schools teach the Torah considerably more.

Thus, in Satmar schools in the UK and North America, girls are never provided with actual copies of the Hebrew Bible or other Hebrew-language texts apart from the siddur, Psalms, and *Pirke Oves* as mentioned above. Rather, they are introduced to the biblical stories in the form of Yiddish-language retellings centred around the *parshes hashevue,* the weekly Torah portion. These retellings are based on the *Tsenerene*, the classic 17th-century Yiddish-language adaptation of the weekly *parshe* which was widely read by women (and also many men) in Jewish Eastern Europe and later in centres of Ashkenazic immigration, ever since its first publication (see Elbaum and Turniansky 2010; Berger 2011 for more information about

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[7] There are some prayers and other texts in Aramaic within the siddur, such as the *kaddish*, but girls and women do not traditionally recite these.

[8] Ashkenazic pronunciation of *Pirke Avot.*

the *Tsenerene*; see Blitz 2019 for discussion of the *Tsenerene* in contemporary Hasidic and other Haredi communities in Jerusalem). The main goal of this study is for girls to become familiar with the biblical stories recited in synagogue, not to actually learn to understand the Hebrew original of the texts, which would be regarded as violating the ban on female Torah study. In such schools, girls never actually come into contact with the Torah itself, only with Yiddish adaptations of it.

In schools of Skver, Belz, and Bobov, girls are generally taught in a similar fashion to that discussed above but are also introduced to some of the original Hebrew text. In such cases, the Hebrew version does not form the core of the curriculum but rather serves as a supplement to the Yiddish adaptations which make up the central aspect of biblical study. Girls are provided with photocopied pages containing biblical extracts. This use of photocopies is acceptable as it is not considered to be actual Torah study. In this system, girls are taught to understand the Hebrew of the biblical verses and short passages in a similar way to that of the siddur, Psalms, and *Pirke Oves*, i.e. by means of translation into Yiddish with the main aim of understanding the sense rather than in-depth analysis. NYF1 (Skver) provides a description of this type of approach to study of the Hebrew Bible from her school experience in New York:

> In fifth grade, I started to study Torah… they made a copy of the portions, because there's this concept that you're not allowed to teach Torah to girls. So, if it's a copy, it's not an actual volume of Torah. You can go around it. The other thing is also that when they had copies, they could cut out verses that they didn't want [us to see]. They basically censored the Torah.[9]

In Ger, Chabad, and Klal Hasidish schools, girls are permitted to study from actual volumes of Torah, but again this does not form the core of the curriculum; instead, the Hebrew original of the texts serves as additional material backing up the Yiddish or English adaptations that are the focus of study.

It is worth mentioning that in Belz and Bobov schools girls study some Hebrew grammar in addition to the text itself. (This is not the case for girls at the stricter end of the spectrum, e.g. Satmar, who do not study any Hebrew grammar at all.) In the UK, this could lead to eventually sitting state-run GCSE and possibly A Level exams (taken at the age of 16 and 18 respectively, and regarded as school-leaving qualifications) in Biblical Hebrew. This reflects a noteworthy fusion of the traditional *taytsh* method of study with secular, non-Jewish British educational approaches, as the Biblical Hebrew GCSE and A Level curricula and associated exams are set by national exam boards and are informed by general UK academic practices. In North America, while the study of Hebrew grammar does not lead to a specific academic qualification, it nevertheless follows a similar trajectory to that seen in the UK, as NYF1 recalls:

> In some point you start learning roots of the words and the [grammatical] rules…when I was in fourth, fifth grade they made a ton of changes for the curriculum. Then they started. They brought in the books of the roots with the rules.[10]

With the exception of *Pirke Oves*, Hasidic girls never study the Mishnah in school, nor are they taught the Talmud, even in abridged or paraphrased form, or from photocopies. The fact that they do not study these texts makes the world of the Talmud foreign to girls and women, and some are not even entirely certain what language the Talmud is written in. This complete lack

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[9] Interview translated from Yiddish; see Appendix, extract 2.
[10] Interview translated from Yiddish; see Appendix, extract 3.

of instruction in Talmud is in sharp contrast to boys, where the Talmud is at the very centre of the curriculum from the age of eight or nine onwards.

Following completion of secondary school, there may be slightly different trajectories in the UK and in North America in terms of girls' education. In the UK, Hasidic girls typically finish secondary school at the age of 16, whereas in the US and Canada it lasts until age 18. Following completion of secondary school, Hasidic girls in the UK usually spend approximately two years studying at a seminary, a religious college for young women. By contrast, in North America, there is more of a tendency for girls to get married and start working immediately after finishing high school. There are several reasons for girls to go to a seminary. Firstly, it acts as a buffer between school and marriage, giving girls and their families some time to arrange a match while they continue to study (and, in the UK, bridging the gap between girls finishing secondary school at 16 and reaching the legal marriage age at 18; this is likely the main reason why going to seminary is much more universal among British Hasidic girls than among their North American counterparts, where secondary school lasts until 18). Second, the seminary curriculum itself includes preparation for life as a married Jewish woman and mother, including the cultivation of good *mides* (moral character), halachah (Jewish law) pertaining to marriage, management of household budgets, etc. Third, attendance at a prestigious seminary serves to raise girls' social status and thereby improve their chances of making a good match. Fourth, seminaries act as teacher training centres within the Hasidic world, and it is there that young women learn the advanced skills needed to continue on to work in primary and secondary girls' schools themselves in later life and pass on their knowledge to the next generations (see e.g. Fader 2009 for discussion of Hasidic women's education and intergenerational knowledge transfer in New York).

The curriculum at seminary resembles that of primary and secondary school with respect to Hebrew texts: at the stricter end of the spectrum (chiefly Satmar), it consists mostly of the siddur, Psalms, and *Pirke Oves*, with no actual Hebrew volumes provided, while in more 'modern' parts of the Hasidic community it may also include textual study of the Hebrew Bible in addition to some Eastern European writings written in Hebrew, such as the *Kitser Shulkhn Orekh*[11] (a manual of practical halachah written by Hungarian rabbi Solomon Ganzfried in 1864) and the late 19th-century works of Lithuanian rabbi Israel Meir Kagan (known as the Chofetz Chaim). The latter are amongst the only works composed in Ashkenazic Hebrew, as opposed to Biblical or Rabbinic Hebrew, that Hasidic girls are exposed to. As in primary (elementary) and secondary school, these texts are not generally studied in depth but rather extracts are introduced in order to give students an overall familiarity with them. The difference in approach between 'strict' affiliations such as Satmar and more 'modern' Hasidic groups is vividly described by LNF2 (Satmar), when recalling her first encounter with Torah study when she began studying at a non-Satmar seminary:

> So London sem[12], for the first time in my life I opened a *khimesh*[13]. I was so excited! So at home I would sometimes take the *khimesh* and I would just read the *tatsh*. It was fascinating! I was like, why don't we learn this stuff?! But I opened for the first time the *khimesh*, I was excited.

Throughout their years in school and seminary, girls' acquisition of Hebrew is completely passive and incomplete; they are generally not trained in reading unvocalized Hebrew and in grappling independently with new Hebrew texts, let alone in producing their own material in the language. As a result of this carefully crafted pedagogical approach to girls' acquisition of

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[11] Ashkenazic pronunciation of *Ḳiṣur Shulḥan ʿArukh*.
[12] Commonly used short form of 'seminary'.
[13] The Pentateuch divided into the weekly Torah portions, usually including Rashi's commentary and the *haftarot*.

Hebrew, women are conditioned to believe that *loshn koydesh* is an extremely complicated and largely incomprehensible language in which they could not possibly hope to have full proficiency. This in turn shapes a pervasive social reality whereby there is a rigidly enforced linguistic gap between men and women, with men's knowledge of *loshn koydesh* regarded as a mysterious and impressive achievement requiring admiration (discussed further in section 4). This situation is not accidental, but rather a result of intentional policies implemented in Hasidic communities at the stricter end of the spectrum based on e.g. the writings of the Satmar rebbe about girls' education (see Teitelbaum 1959).

4. Women's attitudes to Hebrew

The conception of Hebrew as a mysterious, male-only subject instilled in Hasidic women through the educational system is reinforced in many different aspects of everyday adult life in Hasidic communities. For example, magazines, advertisements, and pamphlets produced for Hasidic audiences follow a clear pattern of linguistic gender distinction, whereby content designed for women or mixed audiences is written in Yiddish, whereas content written in Ashkenazic Hebrew is intended exclusively for men. Thus, women receive an explicit language-based signal regarding what type of material is suitable for them, and when they see an advert or article in Ashkenazic Hebrew they immediately understand that they are not the target audience, even though it may appear within a single publication produced for Hasidic households in general. LNF1 (Satmar) sums up this attitude in the following comment about her reaction when she sees an article or announcement written in Ashkenazic Hebrew in a bilingual Hebrew-Yiddish community newsletter:

> If it's in Hebrew then they're targeting people who use it frequently and who can read and understand it well enough and so their target audience is definitely *frim*[14] males.

LNF1 also describes her impression of how boys and men use *loshn koydesh* within their own Yiddish conversation, employing it in a way that girls and women would not do. She notes that although as far as she knows boys and men would not actually have conversations with Ashkenazic Hebrew as the matrix language, they do include a considerable amount of *loshn koydesh* within their Yiddish speech:

> They all have discussions and conversations where they dropped *lushn koydesh* words in conversation very frequently. And it was their primary language after Yiddish.

LNF3 (Satmar) reinforces this sense that Hebrew is not for women with her comment that it feels 'foreign', and that this is by design, as it is not something with which girls and women are expected to engage to any substantial extent.

> I think it's supposed to feel a little bit foreign. Like, it's supposed to feel like that's for the men. Like I don't think it's ever supposed to be a functional aspect of our lives.

The fact that girls and women regard *loshn koydesh* as 'foreign' and inaccessible can result in feelings of exclusion, as well as the sense of a double standard when it comes to the 'correct' use of Hebrew. LNF2 (Satmar) describes a clear feeling that Hebrew is regarded as sacred, unknowable, and 'untouchable' for women, whereas men are allowed to make it their own and even write personal, perhaps trivial, information in it owing to their sense of ownership over it.

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[14] Religious (Yiddish).

I think you preach it's such a holy language, right, why do you write your personal shit in it? That you use a beautiful language and you use it for your personal…, you use it as your own language, that is a beautiful thing. But maybe, you see, that was the difference between the boys' teachings and the girls' teachings. The boys, they made it their language. But for the women it was this untouchable thing, that you get a little bit of, but not the full thing. And, oh, don't you dare use it for anything that you shouldn't *veygn se iz haylig*.[15]

This lack of familiarity with Hebrew can have practical as well as emotional implications: if in the course of everyday life a Hasidic woman needs to understand a document written in *loshn koydesh*, she will need to rely on a male relative, as LNF3 explains:

I know if we ever needed translation I'd go to my dad.

The distinction between girls' and boys' study of Torah and, by extension, Hebrew language, is given spiritual justifications. LNF2 recounts one commonly given explanation for why acquisition of high levels of *loshn koydesh* is not considered relevant for girls: they are regarded as having a different spiritual role and life purpose to boys, which does not require knowledge of Hebrew:

Because girls have a different purpose in life. We don't need to do all these…It's not important, you know, since if you want to speak to the Creator you can speak in the Yiddish language, you know. But boys, no, they need it. Why? Because they aren't so special as you, girl. No, they need it, they need to have the structure, they need all of this to be more spiritual and to experience G-d. But you as a woman, you know, you create life! So, like, you know, G-d is your partner! So, like, you're good; you don't need to know the language. You're fine![16]

LNF3 gives a different, less positive explanation for why girls do not study Hebrew. According to this explanation, which is also in wide circulation in Hasidic communities, girls do not learn Hebrew to the same extent as boys because they lack the intellect for it. Moreover, LNF3 notes that girls do not need to study Hebrew or Hebrew-based subjects because their time in seminary is largely designed to equip them for marriage, not for further study (see section 3 above).

I think [boys are] perceived as smarter and they analyse it more and they have the capacity to understand […] And I don't think [girls are] perceived to be able to understand, or also have the need to, really. Because sem is basically just where you wait to get engaged.

5. Boys' acquisition of Hebrew in cheder (primary school) and yeshiva
As mentioned in the previous sections, Hasidic boys' acquisition of Hebrew differs markedly from girls' from very early on. This divergence begins as soon as boys turn three, a milestone marked with a ceremony called *upshern* where they are given the first haircut of their life. The haircut and accompanying ceremony signifies the transition from infant to boy. From then onwards, boys have a distinct hairstyle from girls, involving short hair and *payes* (sidelocks). The *upshern* also marks the beginning of a boy's studies in cheder and the beginning of his

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[15] Because it is holy (Yiddish).
[16] Interview translated from Yiddish; see Appendix, extract 4.

acquisition of Hebrew. On the first day in cheder, new pupils are given a laminated paper printed with Hebrew letters covered in honey and told to lick them, in order to learn to associate the Hebrew alphabet, and by extension the study of the Torah, with sweetness. This ceremony highlights the centrality of Hebrew to Hasidic male culture and acts as an introduction to the study of the Hebrew alphabet and vocalization. Like girls, boys learn the Hebrew writing system by means of the traditional '*kumets alef u, kumets bays bu*' method according to the Ashkenazic pronunciation. As in the case of girls, there is no distinction made between Hebrew and Yiddish in terms of the alphabet because both are written with the same script.

Following acquisition of the Hebrew alphabet (as for girls, the block version first), boys start to read individual Hebrew words drawn from the siddur and Hebrew Bible (rather than from everyday Hebrew/Yiddish vocabulary familiar to children from the home setting). At this point they do not typically know the meanings of these words and are not taught them, but rather learn to read them by repetition without understanding them. Likewise, boys are not explicitly taught Hebrew orthographic rules and patterns but rather gain proficiency in Hebrew spelling through exposure and repetition. This pedagogical model differs from that seen in the case of girls and from that typically seen in primary-school contexts outside the Hasidic world, where children are introduced to basic writing through their own vernacular and thus learn to associate graphemes with vocabulary that they already know. Conversely, although children in traditional Hasidic communities typically speak Yiddish, which uses the same alphabet as Hebrew, the Yiddish spelling system is taught only later (and in some Hasidic communities is never taught as a separate entity at all). This system helps to reinforce the implicit high prestige of Hebrew vis-à-vis Yiddish in Hasidic male society, as the former is associated with writing and with sacred, often arcane, learning as opposed to everyday speech.

After this introduction to the Hebrew writing system, boys start studying the Hebrew Bible itself, as well as the siddur. As in the case of the alphabet, they do not receive explicit instruction in Biblical (or postbiblical) Hebrew grammar or vocabulary; rather, they acquire familiarity with Hebrew words and collocations by means of the *taytsh* method. LNM4 (Satmar) summarizes this experience of learning to read and write Hebrew by means of *taytsh* in a Hasidic cheder in London. His comments highlight the point that the main aim of this instructional method is for boys to learn to understand the Hebrew Bible (as a basis for later, more advanced textual studies) rather than as a language *per se*.

> In our cheder […] they didn't teach Hebrew as a subject […]; they did teach pointing, but they didn't necessarily teach the language as a language. They simply taught how to read the Torah in order to be able to translate the Torah into Yiddish.[17]

LNM6 (Satmar/Klal Hasidish) likewise states that Hebrew grammatical rules are never studied in cheder (or later) and that boys acquire their knowledge of the language through practice:

> We never study the actual rules and the laws of the language; we only know it from practice.

LNM3 (Chabad) provides a more detailed breakdown of the way in which knowledge of Hebrew is acquired through the *taytsh* method rather than through deductive grammatical or lexical instruction:

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[17] Interview translated from Yiddish; see Appendix, extract 5.

They teach us *hu, hi*[18] and all of that and as you grow up throughout high school you learn more and more… A lot of learning it is learning by practice… So when we learn *khumesh*[19], '*vayoymer* and he said', you know, you're reading it and you're reading in a tune, 'and he says' and so eventually you realize that the *vov* means 'and', the *yud* means 'he' and *omar* means 'said'. Eventually you pick up.

The experiences reported by LNM4 and LNM3 regarding the lack of explicit grammatical instruction received in cheder are representative of the Hasidic pedagogical approach in general. In Glinert's (1999, 31) words, Hebrew linguistic study is an 'alien discipline' for Hasidic educators.

LNM6 (Satmar/Klal Hasidish) provides a historical explanation for why Hebrew grammar is not taught in Hasidic cheders:

There was the time of the *haskule*[20] […] they were very into, um very into learning. I guess they learnt Nach[21] and *dikdek*[22] and stuff like that […] and therefore […] I don't think it's just Hasidim, I think, you know, whoever was around at the time, sort of distanced themselves from these *limidim*[23]. What happened was that *khsidim blabn dokh aybig mit de zelbe zakh*[24] so comes years later, in a *khsidishe khayder*[25], you won't learn BH[26] because they've still got this, you know, still continuing the tradition, which was not to learn *dikdek.*

LNM6's explanation corresponds to the widely accepted understanding (both in the Hasidic world and in secular academic circles) that the absence of Hebrew grammatical study is not a recent Hasidic development, but rather is a traditional policy among Eastern European Jews dating back to at least the early modern period, against which adherents of the Maskilic movement rebelled by emphasizing Hebrew grammatical instruction as well as other non-traditional disciplines (see Stampfer 1993; Etkes 2010; Banbaji 2021).

After approximately two years' study of the Torah, boys are typically introduced to the Mishnah and begin to study it alongside the Torah. As with the Torah, boys learn the meaning of the Mishnah via repetition and rote memorization accompanied by phrase-by-phrase translations. Again, boys learn the Mishnah in Ashkenazic pronunciation, and are not explicitly taught Mishnaic grammar or vocabulary. In the same vein, although Mishnaic Hebrew is a different stratum of the language from its biblical predecessor, boys are not taught to distinguish the two in linguistic terms.

Around the age of eight or nine boys start to study Talmud. While the Talmud is written primarily in (unvocalized) Aramaic, it is not typically considered to be linguistically distinct from the Hebrew Bible or Mishnah. Indeed, Aramaic is generally included along with Hebrew in the term *loshn koydesh*; this view is not restricted to Hasidim but rather is commonly found among Yiddish-speaking Jews and indeed Ashkenazim more broadly (see e.g. Rashi *Megilla* 18 for a traditional source on this issue). As with the Torah and Mishnah, boys learn the meaning of Aramaic words through context, by grappling with specific Talmudic passages,

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[18] 'He, she' (Hebrew).
[19] The Pentateuch divided into the weekly Torah portions, usually including Rashi's commentary and the *haftarot*.
[20] Haskalah, Jewish Enlightenment.
[21] Nevi'im and Ketuvim (Prophets and Writings), i.e. the two main sections of the Hebrew Bible after the Torah (Pentateuch).
[22] Grammar.
[23] Studies.
[24] 'Hasidim always stay with the same thing' (Yiddish).
[25] 'Hasidic cheder' (Yiddish).
[26] Biblical Hebrew.

rather than through explicit study of grammar and vocabulary. At this stage, the teacher introduces Talmudic texts by reading them out, explaining key concepts, translating difficult words as needed, and occasionally writing them on the board or handing out printed pages with a translation into Yiddish. By the time Hasidic boys graduate from cheder at age 13, they are expected to be able to study Biblical and Mishnaic texts on their own, although they might still need guidance from teachers with some unfamiliar words.

Upon completion of cheder, around the age of bar mitzvah (13), Hasidic boys progress to yeshiva, the equivalent of secondary school for males in the traditional Jewish educational system. In contrast to girls, Hasidic boys do not engage in any secular studies at the secondary level and do not complete government-run educational qualifications (i.e. GCSEs or A Levels in the UK; high school in North America). Instead, the curriculum in yeshiva centres around intensive, in-depth study of the Talmud, leading to intimate familiarity with Aramaic. In addition, yeshiva boys study a wide range of medieval commentaries on the Bible (e.g. those of *Rashe* and *Ramban*) and the Talmud (e.g. those of *Rashe* and the *Toysfes*); medieval ethical works (e.g. Bahya Ibn Paquda's 11th-century *Khoyves Halvoves*); early modern halachic works (e.g. Joseph Caro's definitive 1563 compendium of Jewish law the *Shulkhn Orekh*); 19th-century Eastern European writing such as the *Kitser Shulkhn Orekh* and the works of the Chofets Chaim; and Hasidic literature from the 19th century to the present.[27] As such, they acquire deep familiarity with unvocalized texts composed in the medieval and early modern strata of Hebrew by Sephardic and Ashkenazic authors as well as with Eastern European Ashkenazic Hebrew from the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. Interestingly, boys acquire familiarity with the different varieties of Hebrew in a way that largely mirrors the historical development of the language itself, starting with the oldest stratum (the Hebrew Bible) and working through the various historical periods up to the present day (excluding Israeli Hebrew, which is never studied). However, it is important to note that no linguistic distinction is made between these different historical types of Hebrew; they are all regarded identically as *loshn koydesh* (in contrast to Israeli Hebrew, which is considered a separate language; see section 7). Thus, during their time in yeshiva, boys develop advanced skills reading Ashkenazic Hebrew, and indeed it can be argued that this variety of the language plays a particularly significant role in the Hasidic consciousness in that all Hasidic texts are composed in it.

During their years in yeshiva, boys are expected to progress from passive acquisition of Hebrew, i.e. reading, to active acquisition, i.e. composing their own original writings in the language. At first this consists primarily of lecture notes, whereby the teacher gives a lesson on a Talmudic or other textual subject in Yiddish and the yeshiva boy writes it down in Hebrew (illustrated in image 1).

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[27] In the main text we provide Ashkenazic Hebrew transcription of these names and titles as they are used among Hasidim. Readers may be more familiar with them in the following versions: *Rashi*, *Ramban (Nahmanides), Tosafot*, *Chovot HaLevavot, Shulchan Aruch*, and *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* respectively.
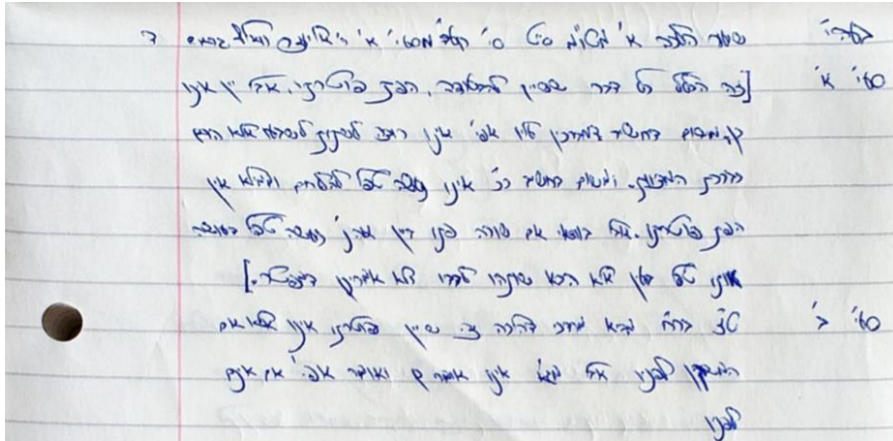
Image 1: excerpt from the lecture notes of a yeshiva student, UK.

This progression from passive skills to the productive use of Ashkenazic Hebrew in one's own writing is a particularly remarkable aspect of the acquisition of the language, as the grammatical rules are never taught at any point and there is no training in composition, style, or any other aspect of text production. LNM4 highlights this point powerfully:

> It felt quite strange, because they didn't teach us how to write *lushn koydesh*. Suddenly, from one minute to the next you must write in *lushn koydesh*. No one forces you, but the environment says that you should write in *lushn koydesh*. And yes, it was a bit strange that the social life in yeshiva expects you to write in *lushn koydesh* even when no one had studied *lushn koydesh* properly.[28]

LNM4 goes on to explain that one of the reasons why many yeshiva students acquire the ability to write their own original texts in Ashkenazic Hebrew despite the absence of formal instruction, and indeed the fact that it is not an official requirement, is because there is intense social pressure to do so:

> I saw that [in the yeshiva] the good students write in *lushn koydesh* […] It's not appropriate to write in Yiddish […] written Yiddish is a bit of an immature language […] You feel that you're more a part of the yeshiva when you write in *lushn koydesh*.[29]

LNM5 confirms this view:

> It's not nice to say, but those boys that wrote it [lecture notes] in Yiddish were usually a bit simpler.

It is of great significance that, despite the complete lack of instruction in Hebrew composition and the fact that no distinction is made between Ashkenazic Hebrew and other historical varieties of the language, when yeshiva boys begin to write in Hebrew the texts that they produce conform to the grammatical and lexical norms of Ashkenazic Hebrew rather than any other historical stratum of the language (see Kahn and Yampolskaya 2022 for details of the grammatical composition of Ashkenazic Hebrew). The reason for this could be that Hasidic boys subconsciously perceive Ashkenazic Hebrew to be the most 'current' and relevant form of the language to them, given that Hasidic texts written in Ashkenazic Hebrew are the most

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[28] Interview translated from Yiddish; see Appendix, extract 6.
[29] Translated from Yiddish; see Appendix, extract 7.

recently composed of all those studied in yeshiva as well as those most directly linked to contemporary Hasidic life.

As time goes on, boys start to produce other types of writings in Hebrew, such as diary entries (illustrated in image 2), notes and invitations to friends, letters, and other private compositions. This serves as preparation for the intellectual elite of male Hasidic society, who in later life will go on to compose official texts in Hebrew intended for public consumption (see section 6).
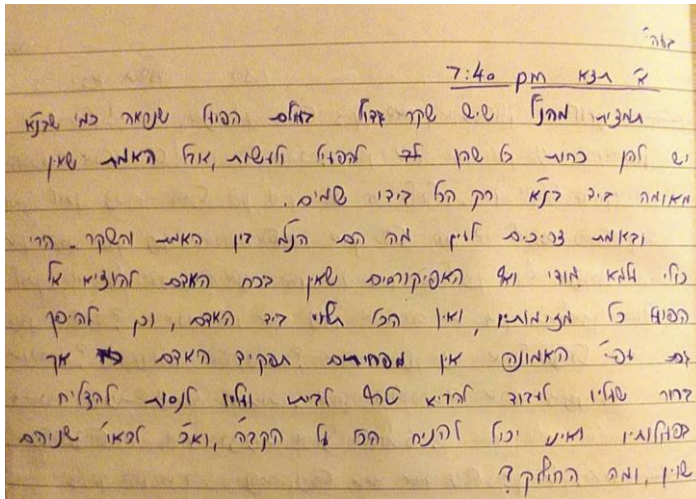

Image 2: excerpt from the personal diary of a UK yeshiva student.

In addition to fluency in reading and writing Ashkenazic Hebrew, Hasidic boys leave yeshiva with advanced skills in reciting the language in Ashkenazic pronunciation, including the ability to read unvocalized texts from all the various historical strata of Hebrew aloud. This ability is noteworthy because it relies on intimate familiarity with Hebrew vocalization rules, despite the fact that these rules are never explicitly taught. LNM6 (Satmar/Klal Hasidish) provides the following explanation for why such an emphasis is placed on *loshn koydesh* within the Hasidic educational model and how it is possible to learn it without studying orthographic and grammatical rules:

> One thing would be to keep the language alive, I would assume – to know it, you know, we wanna know *lushn koydesh*; we don't wanna forget it, and it's something on which we spend time on, right, so practice, basically, does it.

6. Men's productive use of Ashkenazic Hebrew

After yeshiva, Hasidic men continue to use their skills in Ashkenazic Hebrew composition as they tend to use the language to write anything which is considered to be high-register, important, or serious. The majority of Ashkenazic Hebrew literary creation comes from the more 'traditional' end of the spectrum, e.g. Satmar and Vizhnitz, while Hasidim belonging to Chabad produce comparatively little material in the language. However, throughout the Hasidic world, there is an expectation that well educated men will write their own texts in Ashkenazic Hebrew where possible. This expectation means that there is a very extensive variety of original material produced in Ashkenazic Hebrew in all kinds of different genres.

The high status of Hebrew within Hasidic society is literally on display at the centre of every Hasidic household in the form of a wall of bookcases in the living room containing a library in *loshn koydesh*. Hasidic boys begin to acquire the components of this library from bar mitzvah age onwards, culminating at their wedding when they are typically given a new set of

the 20-volume Babylonian Talmud. Thus, by the time they set up their own household, Hasidic men have a solid start for their own home library that will grow throughout the years, containing the whole range of classical Jewish texts, starting from the Hebrew Bible and continuing up to modern Hasidic writings. The respected character of these *loshn koydesh* bookshelves, which generally contain no works in Yiddish or English (unless hidden on a lower shelf with a wooden door so that they remain out of view), is underscored by the respectful and expensive format of the volumes themselves, which are often leather-bound with gold- and silver-foiled titles. Each family gathering is held in the living room with this library of Hebrew books forming the central backdrop. As most Hasidic families have no television and very limited to no internet, the role of books remains quite significant, and the *loshn koydesh* editions constitute the household's most prestigious feature. While this bookcase is dominated by the classical Jewish texts from the biblical, rabbinic, medieval, and early modern periods, they also contain recent publications written in contemporary Ashkenazic Hebrew. As the most highly esteemed echelon of Hasidic society is that of the male scholarly elite, one of the greatest achievements that a man could accomplish is to compose a book suitable for a spot in the *loshn koydesh* bookcase. A wide variety of such books in Ashkenazic Hebrew are composed and published in the contemporary Hasidic world. They typically include ethical and halachic writings, as well as historical narratives and hagiography. Image 3 illustrates two such recent Ashkenazic Hebrew volumes: a compendium of ethical writings, stories and advice; and a biography of the *rebbe* of the Tosh Hasidic dynasty, respectively.

Image 3: *Oytsres Siekh Khaim* ethical compendium by Rabbi Eliezer Chaim Blum (New York, 2020) and *Aysh Koydesh*, biography of the *rebbe* of Tosh by Yoel Marmorshtein (New York, 2016).

In contrast to the books, which are largely monolingual in Ashkenazic Hebrew, booklets devoted to discussion of topical issues may contain some contents in Yiddish and even English as well. Image 4 shows an example of such a booklet, which is devoted to current concerns regarding the effect of recent US government regulations on Hasidic children's education in the United States. Most of the content is in Ashkenazic Hebrew, with official documents and extracts from the mainstream American press provided in the English original alongside parallel Ashkeanzic Hebrew translations; in addition, discussions of these issues published in the Yiddish-language Hasidic press are reprinted in the original Yiddish with no translation. This illustrates the role of Ashkenazic Hebrew within the multilingual Hasidic community: it serves as the main language for discussion of the central issues, while English is treated as a

foreign language of state authorities, and Yiddish is the language of intracommunal dialogue conducted on a less formal level.
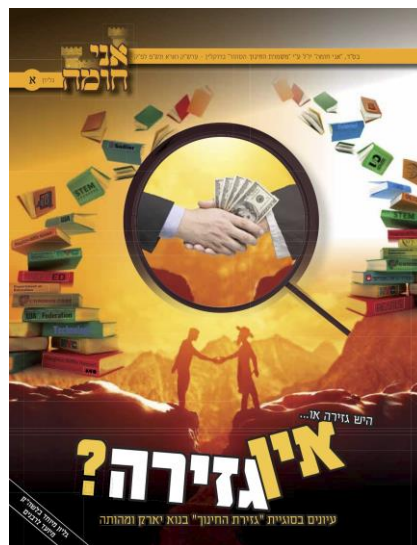
Image 4: booklet *Ayn Gzayre* (New York, 2020).

In addition to book-length and short-form publications, institutional and official documentation is largely written in Ashkenazic Hebrew. This convention reflects the central role of the language in Hasidic communal life and the fact that any serious document emanating from the male Hasidic world is expected to be written in Ashkenazic Hebrew. This includes all kinds of certificates, diplomas, and other credentials issued by Hasidic authorities. Image 5 shows two examples of this type of Ashkenazic Hebrew document: the first one is a completion certificate of knowledge of Mishnah from a cheder, issued in the 2000s; the second is a certificate of excellence from a Satmar Summer Camp issued in 2007. Even this type of short document reflects the characteristic linguistic features of Ashkenazic Hebrew (as discussed in Kahn and Yampolskaya 2022).

Image 5: certificate from *Talmid Toyre Tashbar* (UK, 2000s), and Satmar Summer Camp certificate (UK, 2007)

Both official and private letters, whether written on paper or sent via email, are also typically composed in Ashkenazic Hebrew if their content is considered to be serious or important in any way. Image 6 is an extract from a private letter in Ashkenazic Hebrew written to a friend, discussing Talmudic issues.
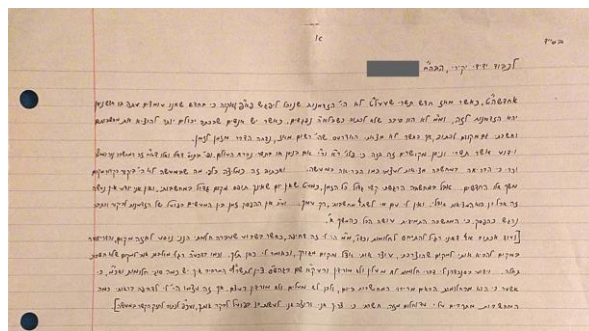
Image 6: excerpt from a private letter (UK, 2000s)

Furthermore, all kinds of greeting cards sent on special occasions, e.g. for weddings, bar mitzvah celebrations, Rosh HaShanah, etc., are composed in Ashkenazic Hebrew if the sender is an educated adult male. Such letters may be produced both on paper and in digital formats, (with WhatsApp being the most popular vehicle, especially since the pandemic). The expectation that Hasidic men should write such communications in Hebrew is so strong that if one were to write one of them in Yiddish, the recipient would likely perceive him as ignorant. As LNM5 puts it:

> Usually somebody with a bit of class writes it [a personal letter] in Hebrew. When you write – how do you call it – a condolence text to somebody in WhatsApp or text usually you would write it in Hebrew. [Interviewer: If someone wrote such a text in Yiddish,

what would that say?] If somebody would do that to me, I'd look at him as…he has a certain degree of primitiveness in him.

Official announcements produced for dissemination to the entire Hasidic community in a given location are often also written in Ashkenazic Hebrew. Such announcements fall into three main categories, namely *pashkeviln*, *moydues*, and communal newsletters. *Pashkeviln* (singular *pashkevil*), are printed broadsides or posters appearing on public walls that are typically produced by rabbinic authorities, but sometimes anonymously too, and have a clear polemic sentiment, opposing some personality or event. For example, a recent *pashkevil* (image 7) produced in London's Stamford Hill neighbourhood[30] is a declaration against the construction of an *eruv*[31] in the area. For more information on *pashkeviln* see Dolev (2005) and Levin and Treleaven (2021).

בס"ד

השבת תובעת את עלבונה

לב מי לא יחרד על חילולי שבת אשר אירעו בעצם יום השבת [לסדר והאספסוף אשר בקרבו] כאשר לדאבונינו רבים נכשלו באיסור הוצאה החמורה בידעים ובלא ידעים, והוציאו חפצים ועגלות מחוץ לגבולות העירוב אשר נתפרסמו ע"י 'ועד תיקון עירובין', וכאשר עוררו אותם על כך, השיבו עזות: יש לנו רב בגאלדערס גרין אשר מתיר לטלטל גם מחוץ לגבולות המסומנים ע"י רבני 'ועד תיקון עירובין'.

ואת אשר יגורנו בא, ובליל שבת התאספו אנשים ונשים ברחובות השכונה ובילו את הלילה באופן מכוער שאי אפשר להעלות על הכתב, וביזו את כבוד השבת באופן מחפיר, אוי לנו שכך עלתה בימינו, שטעמפפארד-היל אשר היתה פעם כלילת יופי משוש לכל הארץ, דוגמה לצניעות ולאצילות, ירדה מכבודה, כגאלדערס גרין היינו, וכהענדזען דמינו.

ולא זו בזה. אלא שכנת נתוודע לכל, שהעסקנים בעלי הסמאראטפאן [אשר בההודעות הראשונות שלהם על העירוב בשמאנהנעם שעשו ע"י ב"ד חצוף פרסמו מספר טעלעפאן לבירורים בעניני העירוב, ולא כשר טלבקש מתושבי השכונה שיצרפו את המספר לרשימת הוואאטצאפ ... וכדי בזיון וקצף]. מתכוננים להמשיך עם עוד עירובין בכל השכונות בעיר, גם במקומות אחרים אשר לא הותרו ע"י 'ועד תיקון עירובין', וכבר בשבועות הקרובים עומדים לתקן עירוב מקולקל בשכונת קנה בוש.

וכוונתם גלויה ומוצהרת להתור תחת סמכות הבד"ץ דפה, ולתקן עירובוא דחצופא בעוד מקומות, וכאשר יראו הבד"ץ שהפרצה כבר נעשה, וכבר מטלטלים בלי עירוב כשר, יאלצו בעל כרחם להתיר גם שם, כביכול כדי להציל אותם מאיסורא ... וכן יגרגו את הבד"ץ משכונה לשכונה כשידיהם כבולות בידי שפלי אנוש אשר בהפקירא ניחא לה.

וכבר הכריזו שלא ינוחו ולא ישקטו עד אשר תתוקן עירוב בעל העיר כאוות נפשם לפרוץ את סמכות הרבנים בעיר.

אבל אשמים אנחנו על אשר ישבנו בחיבוק ידיים עד עכשיו, ולא שמענו לקול זעקת זקני רבני עירנו, ובראשם מרן בעל חשב האפוד זצ"ל אשר שימש ברבנות פה יותר ממ' שנה, אשר צעק כברוכיא שאם יתוקן עירוב פה בעירינו יצמח מזה רק מכשולות.

לכן עלינו לאזור אומץ ולקיים את עצמו של אותו זקן אשר כתב להרבנים הראשיים במדינת לאנדאן בזמנו בשנת תשמ"ח, וזה לשונו הזהב: אכן לדאבונינו אם חס ושלום יבא לידי כן, אי אפשר שלא נגיד במוצות וברחובות דעתינו דעת תורה שדבר זה אסור בהחלט ואין בזה שום תיקון רק מכשולות ומכשולות, על כן אנו פונים אליכם הדרך להסתלק מהתיקון הזה שאינו תיקון אלא מכשול.

בהסונינו נביע את צערינו ברבים על הפרצה אשר נפרץ בחומת השבת ובקדושת המחנה, ולמגר את הקלים מתוכינו.

החותמים בצער רב
'הועד לעשן כבוד השבת'
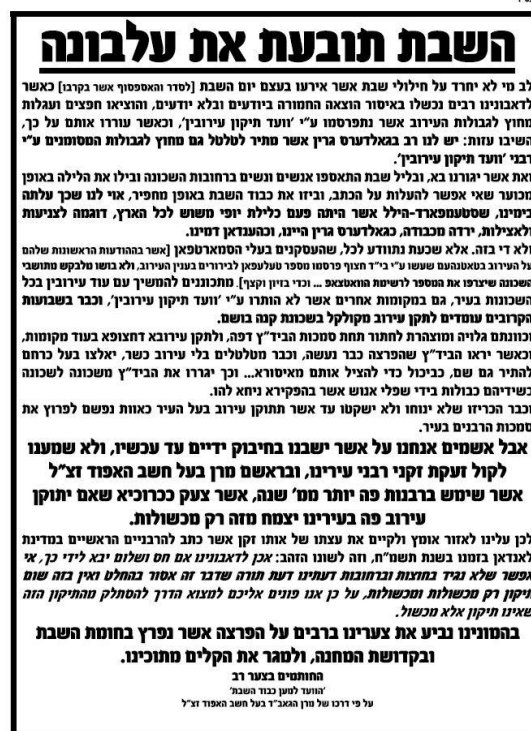על פי דרכו של מרן הגאב"ד בעל חשב האפוד זצ"ל

Image 7: *pashkevil* regarding the establishment of an *eruv* in London's Stamford Hill (UK, 2020)

Moydues (singular *moydue*) are various types of community announcements, guidelines, and instructions. Image 8 shows two examples of such Ashkenazic announcements from the pandemic period issued in Stamford Hill: the first one is an official statement by Rabbi M. C. E. Padwa informing the congregation on the work of Hasidic institutions in light of Covid restrictions, while the second one is an announcement from the rabbinate giving recommendations on how to slow transmission of the virus.

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[30] The main Hasidic centre in London.

[31] An *eruv* is a physical boundary demarcating a specific geographical area as a private domain under Jewish law. Within an *eruv* observant Jews are permitted to carry objects outside their homes on the Sabbath.

Image 8: two *moydues* about Covid (UK, 2020)

Communal newsletters produced partly in Ashkenazic Hebrew and partly in Yiddish are disseminated on the streets and in Hasidic shops once a week before the Sabbath. They contain important announcements, information on upcoming community events, official and private advertisements, etc. The communal newsletter produced in London is called *Kol Mevasr* and can be received weekly via email as well as in print copy. Image 9 illustrates one spread of *Kol Mevasr* from 2019. As the newsletters are produced for the entire community, not just men, the choice of language serves to indicate the intended readership, with portions in Ashkenazic Hebrew for men and portions in Yiddish for both genders (see section 4 for an interview quote on this point).

Image 9: *Kol Mevasr* communal newsletter in Ashkenazic Hebrew and Yiddish (UK, 2019)

Perhaps one of the most striking and unexpected ways in which Ashkenazic Hebrew is used productively is in the creation of popular culture. While the above examples of literary production are centred around the official, institutional, and more serious aspects of Hasidic male society, there is also a rich and flourishing popular culture (again produced and often predominantly consumed by men). Singing forms the heart of this popular culture, with all kinds of *simkhes* (joyful celebrations such as Jewish holidays, weddings, bar mitzvahs, etc.) including singing. Singing takes place in all kinds of settings ranging from weekly Sabbath

celebrations in the home, to huge concerts by Hasidic pop stars with tens of thousands of attendees.

While many Hasidic songs are composed and performed in Yiddish, a considerable number have *loshn koydesh* extracts[32], and some are written in *loshn koydesh* only. Use of *loshn koydesh* in such cases as opposed to the L language, Yiddish, tends to indicate that the song is elevated and serious in nature. The use of *loshn koydesh* songs sometimes involves *shibbuṣ*, i.e. the incorporation of extracts from the Hebrew Bible and from the whole Hasidic textual library known from yeshiva. For example, Motty Steinmetz, one of the biggest stars of the Hasidic musical scene, performs numerous songs in *loshn koydesh*. One of his recent singles, a clip entitled *Umiskadesh* and released in July 2022,[33] is a hymn to Torah learning. The verses are based on a line from a book *Nefesh Hakhaim* (the soul of life) by Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, originally published in 1837 in Vilna. In addition, this same musical form can be used to compose completely new verses and songs. Here again, the selection of Ashkenazic Hebrew instead of Yiddish symbolizes the divinely oriented nature of the song. An illustrative example here would be the single *Noyde Lekho* (We thank You), which was composed and performed by Eli Schwebel in 2020.[34] The song is a prayer of gratitude to God, written when Schwebel was released from hospital following recovery from a serious case of Covid.

At the opposite end of the spectrum of Hasidic cultural production from the high artistic genre of songs in *loshn koydesh*, there is the low genre of traditional comedy called *badkhones* (or *badkhunes*), which is a staple element of various Hasidic *simkhes*, especially weddings. As a rule, the *badkhones* is performed in Yiddish. (See Kahan-Newman 1999 and Mazor 2003 for discussion of *badkhones* in contemporary Hasidic culture; see Krasney 2003 for a historical overview of the genre.) Within Hasidic society, the rigidly prescribed roles of Ashkenazic Hebrew as the H language and Yiddish as the L language provide fertile soil for all kinds of linguistic games, whereby the inversion of the traditional rules can serve as an excellent comedic tool. A striking example of such inversion is a recent stand-up performance by Rabbi Avrum Mordche Malach, a popular Hasidic *magid* (speaker) in New York, conducted in Ashkenazic Hebrew.[35] The piece is a mocking description of the way in which Hasidim make coffee in the *besmedresh* (study house), parodying the language of halachic minutiae. The sketch, which is performed in lively, fast-paced Ashkenazic Hebrew, exemplifies two important issues regarding the productive use of the language in Hasidic society. First, the language itself serves as the main mechanism generating the humour: it is the very clash of the elevated Ashkenazic Hebrew with the blunt, low-register comedy that creates the remarkable comedic effect. Second, Malach's speech is fluent and expressive, and the laughter of his male audience is emotional and infectious, belying the common belief outside the Haredi world that Hebrew in Diaspora communities serves only as a language of prayer and study. The fact that Ashkenazic Hebrew, while a fundamentally non-vernacular, primarily written, H language within a diglossic situation, can be spoken and understood in a live performance of stand-up comedy, is a testament to the fact that a thesis formulated by Chaim Rabin in relation to 19th century Ashkenazic Hebrew applies to the contemporary variety of the language as well: 'Jews didn't use Hebrew in daily speech, not because of lack of language proficiency, but because they supposed it to be improper' (Rabin 2001, 8).

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[32] E.g. see the song *Yihyi Le-Rutsoyn* composed by Cheskie Weisz where a Hebrew text based on a line from Psalms (19:15) is intertwined with Yiddish lines:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RqCTuWXla8k&list=RDEMEjgPx4zqbucX1oQk_9zZTw&start_radio=1.
[33] The official video can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-JK6ghfHdE.
[34] The official single can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QeoaewrCD-4.
[35] The recording of this performance can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzCUQPD4XIo.

7. Men's attitudes to Hebrew

Because Hasidic men tend to have much more engagement with *loshn koydesh* throughout their lives than women do, they naturally have a different perspective on the language than their female counterparts. In this section we examine this perspective with respect to three key issues: the link between Ashkenazic Hebrew and social status, attitudes to Ashkenazic Hebrew in comparison to Yiddish, and the relationship between Ashkenazic Hebrew/*loshn koydesh* and Israeli Hebrew.

As discussed in sections 5 and 6, good skills in Ashkenazic Hebrew are intimately linked to social status within Hasidic male society. The productive use of Ashkenazic Hebrew (as opposed to passive use as a vehicle in which the Torah, liturgy, and other texts are read and recited) is a hallmark of elite education, social status, and masculinity. The composition of texts in Ashkenazic Hebrew is thus strongly associated with the scholarly class who are more likely to produce formal writing, such as rabbis, teachers, and scholars. LNM6 (Satmar/Klal Hasidish) summarizes this situation in his observation that *loshn koydesh* is the expected written language for use in official contexts:

> Our official language is *lushn koydesh*. Like when we write something official it's gonna be in *lushn koydesh*. If it's official. […] the official *toyre* language which is coming from any *toyre moysed, toyre shil*[36]*, moysed, khayder*[37], something like that, so our language is officially *lushn koydesh*.

LNM6 adds that the reason *loshn koydesh* is the 'official' language of Hasidic institutions is that it is holy, and as such befits a holy people whose most esteemed pursuit is religious study:

> What I mean to say is that *lushn koydesh* is the holy language and that's the *toyredige*[38] language and we are *toyredige* people, right? We are *toyre* people, we are learning people, we are *koylel yingerlat*[39], right, so that's our language! Our language… [Interviewer: so it's a status thing] Yeah, it's a status thing.

LNM6 expands on this concept, noting that in Hasidic society it would be inappropriate for a member of the scholarly class to write an official document in Yiddish rather than *loshn koydesh*, as it would reflect a lack of education:

> It wouldn't *pas*[40] a big *ruv*[41] in the *khsidishe velt*[42]- to write a *psak*[43] in Yiddish. It just wouldn't, you know, feel right. […] Because it's as if he hasn't got, you know… It's as if he's not learned enough to write up a nice… The written language, the language of a *tshive*[44] should be in *lushn koydesh*. Writing in Yiddish is as if you're not, you don't have a grasp of our language, right?

The centrality of *loshn koydesh* as a marker of education, social status, and high-register communication is so great that, when a man of any class and level of education wants to write something for a particularly auspicious context, he will choose to write it in *loshn koydesh* and

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[36] Synagogue.
[37] Cheder.
[38] Relating to Torah.
[39] Young men of the *kollel*; *kollel* is a study house for married men.
[40] 'Be appropriate' (Yiddish).
[41] Rabbi.
[42] Hasidic world.
[43] Halachic ruling.
[44] Responsum.

ask for help in order to ensure that it is accurate, rather than write in Yiddish or the co-territorial dominant language, which would indicate lack of education, refinement, and masculinity. LNM6 notes this point, contrasting high-register situations where *loshn koydesh* should be used and care should be taken with its formulation, to private or insignificant types of writing such as diary entries, in which the language is not so important:

> Let's say if you're writing in a *sayfer*[45], you're giving someone a present – a bar mitzvah present, or you're giving someone just, you know, a *khavrise*[46]*,* you're giving them a present – then you write them *haray ze*[47]*...* and you'd ask your friend please help me with the *lushn koydesh.* Right? That's what you do. […] But otherwise, have you ever heard someone come over to you, hi I'm just putting an entry into my diary can you please help me with the *lushn koydesh*? No!

LNF3 (Satmar) provides a female perspective on the prestige with which mastery of *loshn koydesh* is regarded in Hasidic society. For women, high-level Jewish education (which goes hand in hand with good knowledge of *loshn koydesh*) is associated with the best marriage matches, and only the most high-status girls would be considered as marriage prospects for boys with strong *loshn koydesh* skills:

> The good boys were the ones who learnt. […] I guess, the girls who marry learning boys, who got engaged to learning boys, were looked at as good quality girls; they'll probably be teachers as well. Everything is a status element.

The high prestige with which productive use of *loshn koydesh* is associated can result in Hasidic males intentionally employing Hebrew expressions in order to impress and telegraph their scholarly credentials, and *heymishkayt* (Hasidic lifestyle; literally 'homeliness'), as LNM1 (Klal Hasidish) explains. LNM1 describes the deliberate insertion of Hebrew words and expressions as signifiers of one's advanced education and high status as '*lushn koydesh*-dropping', on analogy with 'name-dropping':

> I have a lot of friends who are like that, that it's part of their self-image that even if they're writing in English it would feel appropriate for them that they should be deliberately having copious amounts of *lushn koydesh* there, almost just to show that they can.

LNM5 (Slonim/Klal Hasidish) echoes this attitude, noting that the more educated members of Hasidic society tend to write in Hebrew, and that this is one of the factors distinguishing the scholar from the layman:

> But anybody who's got a bit more – what should we say – a bit more character to themselves, maybe they're a bit more learned, they write in Hebrew. Any rabbinical person, any *talmid khukhem*[48] would write in Hebrew, yeah […] The learned person he understands the *lushn koydesh* much better than the layman on the street who might be working as a milkman or as a driver, he hasn't got the knowledge and the understanding of the Hebrew language as a *talmid khukhem.*

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[45] Book, usually for Torah matters.
[46] Study partner.
[47] Behold this… (a formal opening with the meaning of 'I hereby [give this book to…]').
[48] Person learned in Talmudic texts.

Within Hasidic society there is also a clear distinction drawn between *loshn koydesh* and Yiddish, the community's usual vernacular, with the latter regarded as much less prestigious than the former. LNM5 sums up the difference in stark terms, describing Hebrew as the original Jewish language while expressing the view that Yiddish is at its core a foreign tongue:

> [Hebrew] is our language. This is our original language. Yiddish is a dialect of German; it's not our language. It's just we spoke it for thousand years.

LNM4 (Satmar) goes further in this vein, commenting that written Yiddish is 'childish', and that Hebrew is much more sophisticated. Like LNM5, LNM4 suggests that while Yiddish is acceptable as a spoken language, it is intrinsically of a lower status than Hebrew, and that this could be ascribable to deficits in its very nature making it impossible to express oneself in it in writing in a sophisticated manner. Interestingly, this view echoes the traditional Jewish belief that Yiddish is an inferior tongue, essentially a corrupt variety of German, dating back to at least the early modern period and very prominently expressed throughout the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment), when Jewish writers routinely compared it unfavourably to both Hebrew and German, believing it incapable of serving as a vehicle of serious composition (Harshav 1990; Miron 1996). This attitude to the L language is typical in diglossic situations, as noticed by Ferguson (1959: 329-330).

> If I want to come across as more mature, I write it in Hebrew. But you can also write it in Yiddish, only that in Yiddish for a boy in yeshiva it would come across as a bit immature. One who wants to show that he is mature writes in Hebrew. […] I personally think that people look at Yiddish, the written Yiddish, as a childish thing. Speaking Yiddish, everyone speaks Yiddish, even when you learn you talk in Yiddish. But writing Yiddish is looked at as a childish thing. Why I don't know. I'm not so sure. I have theories maybe, but yeah…My theory is because Yiddish is a very poor language. It doesn't have enough words.[49]

LNM5 reinforces the view that the use of written Yiddish instead of *loshn koydesh* is a marker of comparative lack of education, whereas the use of written *loshn koydesh* conveys sophistication and scholarly prestige:

> The general public who are not so learned would oft write it in Yiddish. But anybody with a bit more character, anybody who's – not only rabbinic – but anybody who has any stand: he's a *magid shier*, or he's whatever, he's a *talmid khukhem*, even if he's not in the capacity of official teaching anywhere, he'll still write in Hebrew. Because that is the richest and accepted and considered the holiest language.

As discussed in section 5, Hasidic Jews do not typically distinguish in a linguistic sense between the different historical layers of Hebrew that comprise the umbrella term *loshn koydesh*. (Note that Israeli Hebrew is not considered *loshn koydesh*; see below.) As the name *loshn koydesh* 'holy tongue' suggests, Hebrew is regarded as sacred, and as having a more elevated status than the rest of the world's languages. This conception of Hebrew as a holy tongue is not a Hasidic innovation but rather has a long history in the Jewish tradition, with the expression itself dating back to the Mishnah (*Soṭa* 7:2) and appearing on numerous occasions in the work of other classical Jewish authors from the medieval period and later. For example, in his commentary on Exodus 30:13, the prominent 13th-century biblical and Talmudic scholar

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[49] Interview translated from Yiddish; see Appendix, extract 8.

Nahmanides makes the following statement about Hebrew 'It is the language that the Holy One, blessed be He, speaks with His prophets and with His people […]; it is the language by which He is called in His sacred names and in which He created His universe'.

Present-day Hasidim ascribe to this longstanding view of *loshn koydesh* as the holy tongue. One of the ways in which this perspective manifests itself is in the notion that because Hebrew is holy, it serves a different function within society than Yiddish, which is not imbued with the same degree of sanctity (though Yiddish has come to be regarded with a certain level of holiness in Hasidic communities over the course of the 20th century, especially in the post-Holocaust era; see Glinert and Shilhav 1991; Fishman 2002; Reiser 2020). The difference in status between Hebrew and Yiddish in this respect is reflected in the commonly held idea that certain topics are appropriate for Yiddish but not for *loshn koydesh*, which is pure and elevated. LNM3 (Chabad) sums up this distinction:

> You can say something inappropriate in Yiddish. You can't say it in *loshn koydesh*. You can say *kush in tokhes*[50], but don't say it in *loshn koydesh*! [Interviewer: Why not?] Cuz I'm not gonna tell you to kiss my arse in *loshn koydesh*; it's not appropriate. [Interviewer: Why is it inappropriate?] Because, again, it's… *loshn koydesh* is the language of sanctification which separates the animalistic tendencies of my ego and gluttony and the 'I' and separates that and makes it holy.

The special, elevated nature of *loshn koydesh* is further underscored by this statement from LNM1 (Klal Hasidish), who observes that some (Diaspora) Jews speak Hebrew on the Sabbath because its holiness makes it particularly suitable for use on the most sanctified day of the week:

> There's no doubt about it, the language itself is a holy language. And that's *kvoydoy*, you know, *bimkoymoy oymed*[51]. You know, that is… There are places where they'll speak on *shabes*[52] only in *loshn hakoydesh,* yeah?

There is a rigid distinction in the Hasidic world between *loshn koydesh,* which is sacred, and Israeli Hebrew, which is not. Within this overall stance, there are varying attitudes to Israeli Hebrew among different Hasidic dynasties, with some groups such as Satmar strictly opposed to its use (Glinert and Shilhav 1991; Reiser 2020), while others have a neutral or positive view of it (Munro 2022). Nevertheless, it is always understood as being a separate language from *loshn koydesh*, and is not regarded as holy. This position is encapsulated in the following comment by LNM6 (Satmar/Klal Hasidish) who clearly distinguishes *ivrit* based on the fact that it is the product of secular Zionists, in contrast to the historical forms of the language. According to this conception, Israeli Hebrew does not have a direct connection to the holy *loshn koydesh*. Interestingly, the view expressed by LNM6 parallels to some extent the scholarly argument advanced by Wexler (1990) and Zuckermann (2009), whereby Israeli Hebrew is not Semitic but rather an Indo-European or hybrid because the generation who spearheaded its revival as a vernacular were native speakers of Yiddish, an Indo-European language, and as such the modern variety represents a break in the chain of continuity with previous historical strata of Hebrew.

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[50] 'Kiss my arse' (Yiddish).
[51] 'Its significance is unaffected' (Hebrew).
[52] Sabbath.

> *Lushn koydesh* and *ivrit* – it's so different […] it's been modernized, it's been changed, the *tsiyoynim*[53], stuff like that. It was founded not by, you know…*ivrit* was created by secular people. And therefore it's not gonna have that element of holiness to it […] The *lushn koydesh* is a continuation, sort of we look at it as a continuation and it's evolved; obviously we know it's different, but it's a continuation of the original thing. Whereas this we see, hey, a few secular people came and created a new language. And we're not gonna take this as our *toyre*, our *toyre* language.

LNM5 (Slonim/Klal Hasidish) highlights a particular ramification of the Israeli use of Hebrew in secular, everyday contexts: for him, the language's potential for holiness is diluted by the fact that it is spoken by everyone, ranging from the most revered of Torah scholars to the lowliest of murders and other criminals. LNM5's discomfort with the idea of everyone in society speaking the same language is noteworthy as a fundamental feature of a diglossic worldview. The participant, as a diglossic speaker, believes that the distinction of holy vs profane language is a cornerstone of morality, and that it is unseemly for people to use the same language in both moral and immoral contexts.

> Because everybody speaks it [Modern Israeli Hebrew], it lessens the impact and the beauty and the sanctity of the language because everybody speaks it. You know, the prostitute in Rechovot or Tel Aviv and the prisoner who's murdered some people, all speak exactly the same language with the same slang.

8. Conclusion

In this article we have proposed a theoretical framework, whereby the use of Hebrew and Yiddish in Hasidic communities is referred to as internal diglossia, whereas the use of co-territorial languages is referred to as external bilingualism. Our understanding of the term *diglossia* is very close to the classic meaning introduced by Ferguson (1959), with some amendments justified by Hudson (2002). Within this model, we have shown that Hebrew in contemporary Hasidic communities is an H language within the Hebrew-Yiddish diglossia. Our analysis is centred around three major issues: mechanisms of acquisition of an H language and resulting inequality in the knowledge of H, which sustains the social hierarchy in the communities; productive use of the H language by the elites; and attitudes to the H language contrasted with attitudes to the L and co-territorial languages.

We have shown that Hebrew continues to play a central role in the life of 21st-century Diaspora Hasidic communities, just as it did in historical Jewish Eastern Europe. Now as then, it serves as a widespread vehicle of written and oral non-vernacular communication, particularly in high-register contexts, and its use is subject to significant differences between the genders. Until the age of three, boys and girls have a broadly similar experience regarding the very early acquisition of Hebrew in the home. Their experience diverges markedly from the age of three onwards as a result of different educational goals. Girls learn basic reading in Hebrew with Ashkenazic pronunciation but do not generally explore Hebrew texts in depth and never develop the ability to write in the language. As adults, they largely regard Hebrew as a part of the male experience and something which is not for them. Good skills in Hebrew are regarded as desirable in a marriage partner as it is a marker of status within Hasidic society.

For boys, intensive acquisition of Hebrew begins at age three and continues throughout the entire period of study in cheder and yeshiva. Boys gain advanced proficiency in reading and reciting texts written in all the different historical strata of Hebrew (apart from Israeli

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[53] Zionists.

Hebrew, which is regarded as a separate language), although they are never taught Hebrew grammar. They also acquire the ability to produce their own original texts in the language in adherence to Ashkenazic Hebrew linguistic norms, again despite never receiving explicit instruction in composition. Already in yeshiva the productive use of Ashkenazic Hebrew (which is not consciously distinguished from other historical varieties of the language but is nevertheless linguistically distinct) is expected and good students begin this practice by making lecture notes in the language rather than in Yiddish.

After finishing yeshiva, the productive use of Ashkenazic Hebrew continues to be a hallmark of educated and mature men, and is associated with the production of 'serious', high-register materials; by contrast, the use of Yiddish in writing is seen as frivolous and immature, associated with women and children who lack sufficient knowledge of Hebrew. The pinnacle of educated male Hasidic achievement is closely linked with Ashkenazic Hebrew, as the most elite members of Hasidic society are Torah scholars who produce books and other substantial written materials in the language. Original compositions in Ashkenazic Hebrew are not, however, solely the preserve of the rabbinic elite in the production of scholarly materials. Rather, we see Ashkenazic Hebrew used in all kinds of everyday written contexts such as messages of congratulation on WhatsApp, important public communication about Covid safety measures, the *eruv,* and other key announcements for the community as a whole, which means that each Hasidic household typically has one or more educated males who can read and disseminate the vital communal information transmitted in the language. In addition, Ashkenazic Hebrew features prominently in the creation of popular songs and other materials which form an integral element of the celebratory events shaping the Hasidic yearly cycle. Thus, despite its non-vernacular status, Ashkenazic Hebrew continues to form a central and vital component of the Hasidic linguistic repertoire; though it is overwhelmingly restricted to the educated male portion of Hasidic society, its use is widespread and multifaceted, including not only scholarly compositions but also everyday written and oral materials produced for personal communication, public announcements, and entertainment.

This central position of Ashkenazic Hebrew to Hasidic male life is highlighted by the attitudes expressed by our interview participants to the language. First, Hasidic men view Ashkenazic Hebrew as the default and expected vehicle for writing, considering the use of Yiddish in written contexts to reflect immaturity on the part of the writer. Thus, use of Ashkenazic Hebrew is strongly bound up with masculinity and adulthood, and the ability to write in it is regarded as an essential component of what distinguishes men from women and children. Second, male attitudes to Ashkenazic Hebrew reflect a highly diglossic worldview, in which certain topics and contexts demand the use of a particular language. As Hebrew is regarded as sacred, it is considered unsuitable for the expression of vulgarity, insults, and other low-register speech, with Yiddish being the accepted vehicle for such types of language. Similarly, a clear distinction is made between *loshn koydesh* and Israeli Hebrew, which is perceived as low-register like Yiddish or other vernaculars.

Our findings show that it is necessary to revise the widely held perception of Ashkenazic Hebrew as a purely historical phenomenon restricted to the Eastern European diglossic system. Similarly, the common belief that the use of non-vernacular Hebrew in the Diaspora is limited to the recitation of the Torah portion in synagogues with a particular pronunciation is utterly insufficient. These views must be replaced with a more nuanced understanding of Ashkenazic Hebrew as a rich, productive vehicle of numerous varieties of written and oral communication, scholarship, and creativity in the Diaspora centres of Hasidic life in the 21st century.

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Appendix

Following are the original Yiddish versions of the interview quotes appearing in English in the body of the article. The quotes are presented here in an adapted version of the standard YIVO romanization system that better reflects our interviewees' Hasidic pronunciation. Note that the English elements appearing in the Yiddish quotes are authentic representations of the interviewees' Yiddish speech, which contains a substantial amount of code-mixing as is typical of Contemporary Hasidic Yiddish.

Extract 1: NYF1

shpeyter m'lernt zikh ous davenen ousnvaynig. yo, nokh farn lernen laynen. but *far deys, s'iz nor*, like, by memory. it's almost like a song – *m'farshtayt nisht de verter, veygn s'iz nishtu kayn khilek* between words. *s'iz* just a song. just, you memorize but without knowing what you're saying.

Extract 2: NYF1

in fifth grade, *hob ikh ungehoybn lernen khimesh…zay hobn gemakht a* copy *fin de khimushim, val s'iz du aza zakh az m'tur nisht lernen mit maydlekh toyre.* so, *oyb s'iz a* copy, *s'iz nisht kan* actual *khimesh.* you can go around it. *de andere zakh iz, oukhet az zay hobn* copies, *hobn zay gekent arousshnadn psikim vus zay hobn nisht gevolt. zay hobn* basically *getsenzert de toyre.*

Extract 3: NYF1

in some point *fangt men un tsi lernen shoyrushim fin de verter in de klulim…ven ikh bin geveyn in* fourth, fifth grade *hobn zay gemakht a* ton of changes *far de* curriculum. *demalts hot men ungehoybn. zay hobn arangebrengt de* books *fin de shoyrushim mit de klulim.*

Extract 4: LNF2

veygn maydlekh hobn a andere tsil in life. *indz darfn nisht tin di ale…s'iz nisht vikhtig, vayst, veygn oyb di vilst redn tsim bashefer kenst redn in de yidishe shprakh, vayst? ober yinglekh, na, zay darfn es, farvus? val zay zenen nisht azoy shpetsyeyl vi di maydl, nayn. zay darfn es, zay darfn hobn de* structure, *zay darfn ale deys tsi zan mer* spiritual *in* to experience g-d. but you as a woman, you know, you create life! so, like, you know, g-d is your partner! so, like, you're good; you don't need to know the language. you're fine!

Extract 5: LNM4

ba indz in khayder […] *hot men nisht ousgelernt lushn koydesh als a* subject […] *me hot yo ousgelernt nekides, ober lav davke az me hot ousgelernt di shprakh als a shprakh. me hot pushet ousgelernt vi azoy me laynt di toyre keday tsi kenen tatshn di toyre of yidish.*

Extract 6: LNM4

s'hot zikh geshpirt gants strange, *val m'hot indz nisht ousgelernt vi azoy tsi shrabn lushn koydesh.* suddenly *fin ayn minit tsim tsvaytn miz men shrabn in lushn koydesh. kayner tsvingt nisht, ober der* environment *zugt az m'darf shrabn in lushn koydesh. in, yo, s'geveyn a bisl* strange *az der* social life *in yeshive* expects *az m'zol shrabn in lushn koydesh afile oyb m'hot nisht ousgelernt lushn koydesh.*

Extract 7: LNM4

kh'hob gezeyn az de gite bukherim shrabn lushn koydesh […] *s'past nisht tsi shrabn in yidish* […] *de geshribene yidish iz a bisl a* immature language […] *m'filt az m'iz mer a khaylek fin der yeshive az m'shrabt in lushn koydesh.*

Extract 8: LNM4

oyb ikh vil ariberkimen mer mature*, shrab ikh es in lushn koydesh. ober me ken oukh shrabn of yidish, nor of yidish far a bukher in yeshive* it would come across as a bit immature. *ayner vus vazt az er iz* mature *shrabt in lushn koydesh. ikh mayn* personally *volt ikh gezugt, mentshn kikn un yidish, de geshribene yidish, als a kinderishe zakh. redn yidish redt yeyde ayner yidish – afile ven me lernt redt men yidish – ober shrabn yidish kikt men un vi a kinderishe zakh. farvus vays ikh nisht. ikh bin nisht azoy zikher. ikh hob efsher* theories *ober, yo…man* theory *iz val yidish iz zayer a ureme shprakh. se hot nisht genig verter.*